The Identities of Young International Adoptees in Finland

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Abstract
Of the 30,000 children adopted yearly all over the world, about 200–300 come to Finland. A former adoption donor country, Finland started receiving international adoptees in the 1970s. Nowadays, there are about 3,000 internationally adopted persons in Finland. This paper focuses on the views and experiences of young Finnish international adoptees, who were interviewed during summer and autumn 2005. Altogether three group interviews and six individual interviews were carried out. The main aim was to study cultural identity and experiences of difference. The primary objective of this study is to give a voice to young international adoptees in Finland and present results as examples of how the dominant population adapts to difference.

Keywords: international adoption, national identity, cultural identity, racism

Introduction
Compared with the rest of Europe, Finland’s population is very homogenous. Less than 3 percent of the total population of 5,300,000 is of foreign origin (Heikkilä and Peltonen 2002). The major historical language minorities include Finnish-speaking Swedes (about 5 %) and the Sami (about 0.03 %) (Ryynänen and Notkola 2007, 284). Due to globalization in the past few decades, all Finns do not look “stereotypically Finnish” as the population has become more heterogeneous. One example of globalization is international adoption. A former adoption donor country, Finland started receiving internationally adopted children in the 1970s. Since the reform of adoption legislation in 1985, about 3,000 internationally adopted children have come to Finland. Compared with Sweden and its 52,000 international adoptees, international adoption is still quite small-scale in Finland (Parviainen 2003; Hübinette 2007).

International adoption is one form of immigration, albeit not self-chosen. Most of the children adopted to Finland come as babies or toddlers, from ethnically distant populations; mainly, Africa, Asia and Latin America, areas that are the focus of my interest here. Adoptees may not have any memories of their native country, and this puts their identity formation in an interesting position, since their appearance differs from the
dominant Finnish population (children adopted from e.g. Russia and Poland can easily assimilate to the dominant population). Contrary to most immigrants in Finland, international adoptees are raised in Finnish culture and they usually have no accent in their speech. Still, at first sight, the adoptees are typically considered foreigners in their home country. It is thus interesting to study how the adoptees’ appearance affects the way native Finns react to them, and further, what the adoptees’ cultural identities are.

International research on adoption abounds. By contrast, Finnish research on adoption is still quite rare. Mostly adoption research has focused on how adoptees adapt to their new home country, new language or even the whole society (e.g. Forsten 1992; Pitkänen 2000). This perspective gives a rather one-sided point of view on the lives of international adoptees. It is also relevant to find out how the dominant population adapts to difference (e.g. Rastas 2007). Today, as the first internationally adopted children in Finland have reached adulthood, it is easier to focus more on adoptees’ own experiences and opinions.

This article studies the conceptions of cultural identity among international adoptees in Finland. I ask what kind of cultural identity the adoptees express, especially with regard to their native country, and what kind of experiences of difference the adoptees have had.

The article begins with a look at the history of international adoption in Finland, with some comparisons to other European countries. This part of the study is partly based on an interview conducted with Ms. Anja Ojuva, Director of Adoption Service of Interpedea (one of the three adoption service agencies in Finland). Next, the methodology and theories of the study are briefly presented. The findings of the empirical analysis are discussed, followed by the conclusion.

International adoption in Finland

During World War II, about 70,000 Finnish children were transferred to Sweden and Denmark, and about 13,000 of them were adopted or fostered there permanently. Interest towards adoption increased in Finland during and after the war. At least 1,000 homeless children were adopted at that time. The demand for adoptive children increased further in the 1950s, but there were more families wanting a child than children needing a family. In addition to domestic adoption, Finnish children were adopted to foreigner countries starting in the 1950s. In the 1960s, interest towards adopting from Finland grew even more, and about 85 children were adopted, mostly to Sweden and Denmark. Only very few children were internationally adopted to Finland at that time. There are no accurate statistics about international adoptions before the 1970s (Parviainen 2003, 26–28). Legislation concerning adoption took effect in May 1985.
About 30,000 children are adopted all over the world every year and about 200–300 of them are adopted to Finland, and about 1,000 to Sweden. It is interesting that the two neighboring countries, Finland and Sweden, which are in many ways similar to each other, differ somewhat in international adoption. Sweden, Norway and Denmark have the highest number of adopted children in the world in relation to their population. In addition, only the United States has received more adoptive children than Sweden in absolute numbers. Sixteen percent of the 52,000 internationally adopted children in Sweden are originally from South Korea (Hübinette 2007). In Finland, the most popular donor countries for international adoption have been Russia, Colombia, Thailand, Ethiopia and India, and in the past few years, China. Today, Finland is estimated to have altogether about 3,000 internationally adopted children.

Adoption policies differ from country to country. In the Nordic countries, international adoption is highly regulated and supervised. Unfortunately this is not the situation in every country. In some European countries, there are more than fifty adoption agencies and no regulatory legislation. Some of the agencies tend to function only for a couple of years, looking for profits. For example, EurAdopt, an association of adoption organizations in 13 Western European countries, tries to advance the ethical rules of international adoption in Europe.

There are three adoption service agencies in Finland: Interpedia, Save the Children Alliance and the City of Helsinki. They are authorized by the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. Adoption service agencies are only authorized to cooperate abroad with an authority or an organization that has been approved by the Finnish Adoption Board (Section 22 in the Adoption Law). The three adoption agencies in Finland cooperate somewhat with different countries. After 2000, new co-operation partners with Finland are South Africa and the Philippines. In addition, China increased its figures significantly in 2000. In 2004 and 2005, almost half of the internationally adopted children in Finland and all over the world came from China, which has recently begun to favor domestic adoption, leading to an increase in the waiting time for adopting to Finland over the past few years.

International adoption has become much more popular, whereas the number of children available for international adoption has diminished significantly. The number of adopted children coming to Finland was at its highest at about 300 children per year, but has diminished to about 200 children per year. This is partly due to the growth of domestic adoption in developing countries. The primary option for an orphan is to place him or her in a new family in the native country. Nowadays, many times, especially older children or children with special needs are available for international adoption. This creates a situation where adoptive parents need to be more trained to confront the possible challenges that their children might face. This is why Finnish adoption agencies provide adoptive counseling before and after adoption.
**Methodology**

The present article’s field of research is sociology and cultural geography. Constructionist research tradition concentrates on the discursive meanings of certain concepts, e.g. nationality, race and ethnicity (Häkli 1999, 133–137). Constructionism appears relevant when discussing Finnish identity as well as difference and tolerance in Finland. The concept of difference can emerge in every-day discourses when we, unconsciously or consciously, distinguish between “us” and “them” in our speech. Thus, language has an important, if not exclusive, role in the formation of identities and difference.

The data for this study was collected and analyzed by using qualitative methods (Hirsjärvi, Remes and Sajavaara 1997, 161–165). The primary aim is to describe and explain the experiences of the respondents. Data for this study was collected through thematic interviews with internationally adopted teenagers. Three group interviews were conducted at a summer camp for adopted children and teenagers organized by an adoption service agency in 2005. The interviewed campers were between 12–16 years old. Besides, two older adopted camp tutors participated in one group interview. In addition to the group interviews, six in-depth individual interviews were carried out with international adoptees aged 19–27 years in November and December 2005. The contact information of individually interviewed adoptees was provided by adoption service agencies. The data collected by individual interviews will be used here as the main data. Taking part in the summer camp thus served as a learning situation from the point of view of research and helped to develop research questions.

Four out of the six individually interviewed adoptees were Swedish-speaking Finns. This was not intentional for the study, but has to be taken into consideration when analyzing results. International adoption is rather popular among the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland. The interviews were carried out by the author in Finnish. Only one of the four Swedish-speaking interviewees did not speak fluent Finnish, whereas the rest did. The aspect of belonging to two minorities in Finland raises many interesting research perspectives, which cannot be fully dealt with here.

**Previous research on cultural identity and difference**

The concept of identity is multidisciplinary and has spread, especially after the 1990s, into several fields of research; e.g. sociologists, political scientists and geographers, all have contributed to debating the concept (Hall 1999, 245). Usually, an individual thinks about his or her identity when s/he is not certain to which group of people s/he belongs. For instance, family and personal identity are often considered especially when they are not received in the bloodline. With identity, people try to escape uncertainty (Bauman 1996a, 19; 1996b, 162).
The concept of identity is usually divided into *individual identity* (or self identity) and *collective identity* (e.g. Giddens 2001, 29). The most important difference between individual and collective identity is that individual identities are constructed in relation to *difference*, whereas the basis for collective identities is *similarity*. Identity helps a person to stand out from other people, and on the other hand, identify with a wider group of people (Jenkins 1996, 19–20). Identity is therefore not the opposite of difference, but rather, dependent on it (Woodward 1997, 29).

*Culture* and identity have a strong connection to each other (e.g. Liebkind 1994, 21). Rutherford (1990, 26) stresses that culture and identity can never be totally separated. Cultural systems of meanings create a sense of togetherness and group solidarity and, on the other hand, maintain difference towards other cultures (Alasuutari and Ruuska 1999, 41). Further, *ethnicity* is strongly intertwined with cultural and national identity. Ethnicity is considered a strict boundaried conception of cultural identity, which includes e.g. a historically settled population and strong relationships due to mutual marrying. Ethnicity is thus based on blood ties (Hall 2003, 92–93). Ethnicity is usually misunderstood. Many times only certain groups are considered ethnic, while the dominant population is not. For instance, the main department store in Helsinki has a food section entitled “ethnic food”, where ‘ethnic’ refers to everything not-Finnish and preferably exotic. In addition, ethnicity is used to refer to skin color, especially to dark skin color (e.g. Brottveit 1999, 126). Because of these arguments, in this study, the concept of cultural identity instead of ethnic identity is used when referring to the identity of international adoptees.

Hall (1999, 250–251) introduces *hybrid* identities with which he refers to the identities of immigrants living “between two cultures”. Hybridity can also help us understand that all identities combine several elements and cultures. The hybrid aspect of identities may be useful when discussing the identities of international adoptees. Still, it has to be remembered that adoptees differ from other immigrant groups in many aspects. While an immigrant might cultivate his or her native country and its culture, an adoptee might be ignorant or uninterested in the traditions and customs of the native country. I was interested in knowing whether my interviewees found it possible (or even desirable) to maintain both their native country’s and home country’s cultural identities.

We usually have a certain image in our minds of what different nationalities look like. Additionally, we categorize people by the major race to which they appear to belong. Thus, physiological features (e.g. skin color, hair texture and color) are important in categorizing people (Miles 1994, 109–110).

These perceptions are often used as a basis for racist judgments. For instance, dark-skinned people are easily seen as being of a particular race, whereas Caucasians are
not. “White” people do not define themselves as a “race”, but especially dark-skinned people suffer from radicalization (Miles 1994, 111–112). Liebkind (1994, 39) borrows the classical definition of racism from Broberg (1989): “[R]acism consists of a series of illusions that a certain group of people is morally, intellectually and culturally overpowering to another group and its overpowering characteristics are passed on through next generations”.

Racialization is one form of othering. By labeling some people as others, it is easier to reinforce national identity, while others are being excluded from “us”. The other forms of racist othering are stereotyping and defining as exotic or erotic. Hybrid identities may question this categorization, since they cannot be classified easily into any category.

Rooth (2002) has researched international adoptees and their settling to working life in Sweden. According to his research, skin color influences adoptees’ employment, and adoptees whose appearance differs from the one of the dominant population received worse employment opportunities than adoptees whose appearance assimilated to the dominant population. According to Rooth’s findings, one can say that racialization still plays a significant role in today’s world.

Findings

Cultural identity of teenage Finnish adoptees

According to Jenkins (1996), both individual and collective identities are defined from inside and outside. It will be interesting to find out any possible controversy between the self-identification of adoptees and the categorization that comes from the people around them. Further, we will take a look at how respondents describe their negotiations to become “Finnish”.

This is how my respondents described their own identity:

“I could say that my identity is two-sided, but it is not like you could draw a line in-between. It is rather that they merge into each other.” (Male, 21 years, native of India)

“Sometimes I want to hang a piece of paper around my neck that says that I’m adopted from there and there and that I’m a Finn.” (Female, 22 years, native of India, group interview)
When the interviewees were asked which nationality they identified with, the answer was always that they felt themselves to be Finnish. Further, respondents could be divided into two groups, those who felt “completely Finnish” and those who also emphasized their native country in their speech. The latter group (three out of six individually interviewed adoptees) also believed that their native country was recognizable in their identity, e.g. as cheerfulness or spontaneity. Still, none of the young adoptees felt that they lived between two cultures. According to them, one reason for this is that they do not have enough experience of their native country. It can even be that young adoptees have no other choice but to identify as Finns. As one interviewed young man adopted from Colombia expressed regretfully, he cannot identify with Colombian culture because he does not speak Spanish.

The interviewed adoptees who felt “completely Finnish” said that they differed from other Finns only in the way they look.

“*The only thing that reminds me is when I look into the mirror in the morning... it’s like, oh yes.. I’m dark-skinned.*” (Male, 20 years, native of Guatemala)

In general, the interviewees felt it understandable that people were interested in their origin. They also felt that people’s reactions were mostly positive. However, two of the interviewees felt these questions were insulting even if they were presented kindly. They felt that curiosity towards their native country made them feel different and non-Finnish.

Two of the six individually interviewed young adults had visited their native country after coming to Finland. A young woman adopted from Ethiopia visited her native country as 23-year-old and a young man adopted from India visited India when he was just a 10-year-old. Two other young adults planned to visit their native country during the next few years, whereas two interviewees were not sure if they even wanted to. The interviewees who were not too eager to visit their native country were the ones who felt “very Finnish”. As Howell (1999, 44) states, not all adopted children have a “natural desire to seek their roots”. In any case, most of my respondents did want to do so at least in some way. There are also significant differences in how international adoptees relate to their native country. Partly this can be due to the fact that adoptees are rarely in touch with their biological parents. Only two of the individually interviewed adoptees had some contact information for their biological parents, usually the mother.
Based on the interviews, it can be said that international adoptees do not have a Finnish status in their first contact with strangers. They have to justify and explain themselves in order to “earn” Finnishness in the eyes of others, since their appearance points to a different origin. Many of the interviewees said that they usually tell “their story” and adoptive background right away when they meet new people, e.g. when starting a new hobby or a job. They know that the questions will come up sooner or later, so they find it is easier to take up the matter themselves.

According to Forstén (1992, 9), the age of arrival has relevance to how adoptees “adjust” to their new home country. This was confirmed by one of the respondents, a young woman adopted when she was six years old from Ethiopia. She felt it quite hard to come to a new country, as she had many memories of her early years in Ethiopia. In addition, she had to learn a new language and start school very soon after coming to Finland. The other adoptees interviewed for this study had a very different starting point in this respect, as they did not have any memories of their native country.

Brottveit (1999, 128–133) presents three different possibilities for an adoptee to construct a cultural identity that he has found studying the identity of Norwegian young adults adopted from Korea and Colombia. He names these three identity groups as: “Norwegian”, “double-ethnicity” and “cosmopolitan”. The group of “Norwegians” could correspond in this study to the young adoptees who felt “completely Finnish”. Brottveit’s “double-ethnicity” corresponds to the young adults who also felt their native country to have an importance in their life today. Finally, one of my interviewees for this study can be considered to be “cosmopolitan”, probably because she was already six years old when she came from Ethiopia to Finland. In addition, she has travelled a lot and besides has lived in another country for a longer period of time. She also referred to herself as cosmopolitan.

Looking different in Finland

“We had a photograph of all the pupils in our school and everybody else was very white, except one brown spot... me.” (Female, 14 years, native of Ethiopia, group interview)

The respondents’ experiences of difference varied from harmless to more serious instances of racism and discrimination. In most experiences, appearance had a relevant role, since stares and categorizing glances can make an adoptee feel different. Discussions during the group interviews revealed that especially in school age, any kind of difference was considered difficult. Even appearance or clothing that differs from that of the dominant population can cause bullying in school. One interviewee said that when one is young, it is very important to identify with Finnish culture and have one’s own (Finnish) friends. Thus, the challenge posed by a different background
intertwined with the general urge of young people to emphasize their “normality” (Tolonen 2002).

Several interviewees discussed being bullied in primary school. Different appearance or even arguments like “your parents are not even your real parents” were used as reasons for bullying. Bullying was reported to become less common as the respondents grew older. On the other hand, appearance that differed from the dominant population had now at times become a positive and even desired feature.

One issue of interest that came up in interviews was that Finns tend to speak English to adoptees in first contact. The respondents considered this mostly a sign of good customer service and friendliness, but they also sometimes found it annoying. Some of the interviewed adoptees said that they sometimes answered in English, just to be polite and not to embarrass the other person.

The interviewed adoptees had very different opinions about the occurrence of racism in Finland. One reason for this is probably the varying criteria for what counts as racism. This is how my respondents defined racism:

“I don’t think it is racism to consider someone different, but if you think that somebody is somehow inferior because of it, then it is.” (Female, 24 years, native of Bangladesh)

“It is a conscious thought and there are really fundamental reasons for why a person thinks that way.” (Male, 21 years, native of India)

Two of the young women had a similar definition of racism. As in the first quote above, they said that it was not racism to see different colors unless you gave these colors unequal value. This is close to the definition by Liebkind quoted above. In addition to this definition, two interviewed young men defined racism as conscious anger, as the second quote illustrates. These men did not consider it racism if somebody shouts racist comments on the street. According to them, this was often done “just for fun”. In addition, they thought that a racist person must have solid grounds for why they think in that way about certain groups of people. The interviewees said that they had never met such “real racists”.

Two of the six individually interviewed adoptees said that they had not encountered much racism in Finland. On the other hand, one woman adoptee had been physically threatened by skinheads. This was the most extreme example that came up in the interviews. In addition, a young woman adopted from Bangladesh brought up her experiences with working in bank customer service, where she had encountered many
racist comments and discrimination from her clients. She said that these experiences made her question her own Finnishness. In the future, she did not want to work face-to-face in customer service with clients.

Still, the most common form of racism was what particularly younger adoptees had to endure, i.e. shouting on the street. The shouters were usually boys from their own age group. Also Jaakkola (1999; 2005) noticed in her research on the attitudinal climate in Finland that boys aged 15–17 years are the most prejudiced age group in Finland.

In her article, Rastas (2004) discusses the adoptee’s need to understand racist actors and their ignorance. Also in this study, it appeared that the respondents wanted to understand people with prejudices. As a young man adopted from India said, these prejudices are passed on through generations. Parents might use certain words when speaking of immigrants or people with different skin color, and this leads to their children using the same words. One interviewee continued that this patient attitude towards prejudiced people creates a situation where adoptees’ own rights are forgotten.

Some of this patient attitude among international adoptees appears to stem from the attitudes of their adoptive parents. According to my respondents, adoptive parents advise their children to encounter racism and prejudices in a tolerant way.

“Yes, when you say that you are adopted, you’ll get people on your side. After you have told them that you are adopted, they are okay with it.” (Male, 20 years, native of Guatemala)

Every interviewee both in group and individual interviews also thought that other immigrants and especially refugees confront much more racism than they do.

**Special features of international adoption**

“One person asked me how old I was when I moved from home – and then she asked if I had heard from my adoptive parents after that.” (Female, 22 years, native of India, group interview)

General awareness of international adoption is still poor, although adoption is getting more attention in the Finnish media. Many of the interviewees felt that they needed to correct misguided conceptions about international adoption. As a young man adopted from Guatemala said, sometimes he felt that it was his purpose in life to diminish prejudices and increase awareness of international adoption. It is also quite common that adoptive parents have to face prejudices about not having their “own” children.
International adoption is not yet entirely considered a family bond on a par with genetically related children and parents.

Some of the interviewed adoptees criticize Finnish society, where blood ties play such a significant role. As the next quote represents, it is insulting when social kinship is not considered to be as real as biological bonds. This young woman wonders why she is always presented to others as an adopted friend or cousin.

“She is our adopted cousin. It sounds like, she is not our BIOLOGICAL cousin.”
(Female, 27 years, native of Bangladesh)

Within the family, adoptive background is often even forgotten. One female respondent, who took part in a group interview, told an amusing story about a food allergy that ran in the family, although the genetic relationship obviously did not exist. Also a young man in a group interview marveled at how similar he had grown to his father.

According to the interviewed adoptees, once again the questioning of family relations comes from the outside, not from within the family. Adoptees find it very insulting when people ask about their “real parents” and about their parents’ “own children”. Thus, the dichotomy between biological and social parenthood and identity is very much alive in adoptees’ everyday life.

The interviewees also felt that they were often expected to behave two times “better” than their peers. A young woman adopted from Bangladesh gave an example. She sometimes experienced great pressure when driving a car, since, according to her, she needed to fight against two prejudices as a driver: one because of her female gender and one because of her skin color.

According to the interviews, adoptees first need to dispel suspicions and talk about their adoptive background, before the attitudes towards them become neutral. One interviewee said that in this way internationally adopted children seek approval and trust.

One girl adopted from India, who took part in a group interview, wondered why people mistreat immigrants and refugees, but then say to her that “it is so cool to be adopted”. Interviewed adoptees also said that people’s reactions towards them changed dramatically after they mentioned their adoptive background. A woman adopted from Ethiopia commented on this by telling that when she is in Helsinki, the capital of Finland, she is regarded as a refugee, but in her small hometown, everybody knows she is adopted. This difference in attitudes between bigger and smaller towns is interesting and counterintuitive: often small towns are perceived as more racist than global cities. Some
of the interviewees did indeed say that it is easier to live in a bigger town, where you can assimilate to a mass of people.

Four out of the six individually interviewed adoptees were Swedish-speaking Finns. This created an interesting standpoint in the study. International adoption is popular among Swedish-speaking Finns, and one of the three adoption service agencies is founded by Finnish Swedes. In interviews, these Swedish-speaking adoptees brought up that their parents wanted to put them in Swedish-speaking schools since they assumed Swedish-speaking Finns to be more tolerant because of their own minority background. Indeed, according to research, in comparison with Finnish-speaking Finns, Swedish-speaking Finns are more tolerant towards foreigners (Jaakkola 1995).

Obviously, the Swedish-speaking background also came up in interviews when talking about Finnishness and Finnish cultural identity. The interviewed Swedish-speaking adoptees did not consider Swedish-speaking Finns to be typical Finns. They were seen as more open-minded than the dominant population. They thought that was one reason for less bullying in Swedish-speaking schools. Thus, belonging to another minority can function as a protective feature in the life of an international adoptee. A young man adopted from India stressed that identity in general is very important to the Swedish-speaking minority, and continued that he is seen as “the most Finnish” among his Swedish-speaking friends.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study is to give a voice to young international adoptees in Finland. Many times when discussing adoption, the needs and rights of parents are well presented, while at the same time, the views of adoptees are forgotten.

All interviewed young adoptees felt primary Finnish. Their answers were further divided into two groups, to those who felt “completely Finnish” and to those who felt that their native country showed in their identity. Since every international adoptee has a unique life story, it is natural that their views about their own identity are different. Also the interest towards one’s own native country varied from non-existent to more active. The majority of my respondents, but not everybody, was interested in their native country and culture.

On the basis of the adoptees’ experiences of difference, it can be said that appearance has a significant role in being accepted as Finnish. Having a Finnish passport and citizenship does not show outward. Visual appearance is emphasized in contact with new people. Adoptees with a skin color that differs from that of the native population
can “earn” Finnishness in the eyes of others only by telling their story. Nevertheless, the interviewed adoptees felt that they were able to obtain “Finnish status” much more easily than other immigrant groups.

Especially Nordic adoption research concerning identity and difference (c.f. Howell 1999; Grotevant 1999) shares much with Finland’s situation. The reasons may have to do with the similarity of cultures and adoption processes, even if the number of adoptees and the media attention on international adoption in Sweden are manifold in comparison with Finland.

According to the interviewed adoptees, questioning their family relations came from outside, and not from their own family. Adoptees found it very insulting when people asked about their “real parents” and about their parents’ “own children”, or when they were presented as “adopted”, not “real”, relatives. Thus, the division between biological and adoptive parenthood and identity is very much alive in adoptees’ everyday life, partly due to remaining lay ignorance about adoption in Finland.

References


**Appendix 1. Interviews**

**GROUP INTERVIEW I**

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**INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS**

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