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Racialization, Othering, and Coping Among Adult International Adoptees in Finland

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative interview study examined experiences of racialization and coping among 14 adult international adoptees in Finland. The results show that adoptees encounter a range of racializations by which they are made 'other' and excluded from Finnishness. Racialization mostly occurs indirectly and subtly, and often by significant others, and consequently is more difficult to cope with. The findings suggest that the Finnish adoption community and adoption research should pay more attention to experiences of racialization among adoptees and take notice of the context-specific nature of coping when supporting adoptees to develop strategies that reduce discrimination and protect their well-being. However, eliminating racism requires interventions at all levels: from the individual to the family, community, and nation.

KEYWORDS: international adoption, racialization, othering, racism, coping

Finland, like the other Nordic countries, is a welfare state with a high standard of living, a high quality education system, social justice and gender equality. However, unlike the other Nordic countries, Finland remains a relatively homogenous community, where only about 5 % of the total population of 5.4 million has a foreign background (Official Statistics of Finland, 2012b). Moreover, Finland has thus far been a minor player in international adoptions. In fact, until the 1970s, Finland was a donor country that gave children for adoption, mainly to the other Nordic countries, and international adoption to Finland began in the mid-1970s (Interpedia, 2012). Currently the Finnish population includes around 4,700 international adoptees, of whom approximately 1,000 are adults. The adopted children have primarily come from Russia, China, Thailand, Colombia, South Africa and Ethiopia, and around 53 percent of them are females. (Official Statistics of Finland, 2012a.)

Currently, with the growth of immigration, issues related to immigration, multiculturalism and racism have become politically sensitive in Finland, and right-wing political extremism has gained ground. In addition, racist crimes and acts against non-white persons are frequently reported in the Finnish media. Thus, racism in Finland is not just a question of occasional acts by political extremist groups and racially motivated crimes but has become an integral element that non-white immigrants have to cope with in their daily interaction with the Finnish majority population. The recent increase in the rate of immigration to Finland has stimulated research interest in the topic. Several studies on immigrants and ethnic minorities indicate that racial discrimination is a pervasive problem in the everyday lives of ethnic immigrants in Finland (e.g., Keskinen et.al., 2009a; Puuronen 2011, Rastas 2002; 2007; 2009). However, immigrant studies

have seldom included adoptees, as international adoptees are not officially seen as immigrants, but as belonging ethno-culturally, socioeconomically, linguistically and in their religious affiliation to the majority population. Nevertheless, despite fulfilling all the criteria of Finnishness in terms of nationality and culture, the non-white appearance of most international adoptees constitutes a social stigma that distinguishes them from the white majority (see Goffmann, 1974). It is this external difference that leads them to be assigned to the same category as immigrants and foreigners generally, and renders them particularly vulnerable to experiences of discrimination and prejudice. However, unlike other immigrant groups in Finland, international adoptees are members of the privileged section of Finnish society, as they are mostly brought up in middle or upper-middle class families.

Adult international adoptees have been largely absent in both the Finnish and immigrant research domains'. This study seeks to fill this gap by investigating international adoptees' experiences of prejudice and discrimination through their own voices. Further, since racism studies have often been limited to experiences of racism per se, this study also attempts to make visible the varied individual ways in which adoptees cope with perceived discrimination and prejudice. This report starts by presenting the theoretical background and central concepts of this study, and continues with a brief review of the previous studies on experiences of racism and the coping strategies of international adoptees. While Finnish adoption research has concentrated on attachment issues in childhood and on questions concerning adoptive parenting, studies on experiences of racism and the coping strategies of international adoptees in the Nordic context have mostly been conducted elsewhere. Next, the main findings from the interviews are

presented, along with a discussion of previous findings. The last section concludes and offers suggestions for future research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

The theoretical framework of this study derives from critical race and whiteness studies and postcolonial Nordic feminism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Essed, 1991; Keskinen et.al., 2009b; Matsuda & al., 1993; Murji & Salomos, 2005; Omi & Winant, 1994). According to these theories, concepts such as race and whiteness are either objective or static, nor do they correspond to biological or genetic reality but are social constructions that are historically, socially, politically and culturally produced. Furthermore, these perspectives challenge the normative and dominant nature of whiteness and the hegemonic and privileged position from which whites view themselves, others and society and on the basis of which racialized power relations are maintained. In postcolonial Nordic feminist research, Finland does not emerge as an innocent outsider in the colonialist divide between the “West” and “Others”; instead colonialist distinctions have strongly defined the development of Finnish culture. This can be seen, in particular, in the ways people of color are racialized in present-day Finland (Rossi 2009; Vuorela, 2009). Moreover, postcolonial Nordic feminist research emphasizes the intersectional perspective, where gender, class and race are mutually constituted in and through one another, forming the basis for a variety of patterns of disadvantages and privileges (Keskinen et.al, 2009b).

In this study, the word *racialization* is a central concept, and it is used to emphasize the view that race refers to processes that are socially constructed whereas racialization refers to processes of differentiation by which social relations and categories between people are structured on the basis of their human biological characteristics (Miles 1993). The term also signals the processes by which ideas about race are constructed, justified and acted upon. In addition, the groups created through racialization form a hierarchy, in which one's own group is defined as superior, and so legitimates the existing power relations. (Murji & Salomos, 2005.) Moreover, racialization is underpinned by a dialectical and practical process which in turn is supported by a power dynamic that excludes certain racialized groups as the inferior 'other' while maintaining the superiority of the 'self'. Discourse of this kind can be termed racism, as it excludes racially identified 'others', or promotes, secures or sustains such exclusion (Goldberg, 1993). Hence, the concepts *other* and *racism* are also used in this study, as they are substantially connected to racialization, which is one of the most powerful forms of *othering* where people who differ from the norm are exoticized and stereotyped with an essentialising and negative valuation (Van Dijk, 2004). In the case of international adoptees in Finland, this means that while they meet the criteria of belonging to Finnish society due to their nationality and cultural practices, their belonging to Finnish society continues to be questioned; the explanations can be found in the processes and acts of racialization.

Experiencing racism is harmful, as it causes psychological tension and demands a coping response from the individual (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The concept *coping* is used in this study to illuminate the responses to specific experiences of racism reported by international adoptees. It should be noted that coping is not a specific behavior but the myriad actions

individuals use to deal with stressful experiences (Skinner et.al. 2003). However, according to the coping literature, coping can be divided into two general domains: strategies oriented toward confronting the source of stress (problem-focused strategies), and strategies oriented toward avoiding dealing directly with the problem (emotion-focused strategies) (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The use of problem-focused strategies involves actions designed to directly change the aspect of the environment that is threatening, that is, at finding a solution to the problem, or at least minimizing the effect of the problem. Emotion-focused coping in turn involves efforts aimed at managing internal states through defensive reappraisals, whereby the threatening significance of the event is distorted and the event is misjudged as benign or neutral. Coping may also be further characterized as engagement, which reflects a motivation to approach or fight, or disengagement, which reflects a motivation to avoid or flee (Kaiser & Miller, 2001). In addition, coping can be manifested as attributing the negative events to discrimination (versus the self), disengaging self-esteem and effort from identity-threatening domains (versus striving in these domains), and increasing identification with one's stigmatized group (versus distancing oneself from the group) (Major & O'Brien, 2005). In general, a higher proportion of active or problem-focused coping has been associated with better psychological well-being than strategies of avoidance and withdrawal (e.g., Alvarez & Juan, 2010). Coping is, however, a multidimensional phenomenon, and any given way of coping is likely to serve many functions (Skinner et.al., 2003). Further, coping and its outcomes are determined by many factors, including the nature of the stressor, personal resources, culture and social contexts (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

PREVIOUS STUDIES ON RACISM AMONG INTERNATIONAL ADOPTEES

Finnish adoption research has concentrated mostly on attachment and learning difficulties among international adoptive children and on issues related to adoptive parenting (e.g., Raaska et.al., 2012; Sukula, 2009). Rastas (e.g., 2002; 2007; 2009) studied experiences of racism by transnational children and adolescents in Finland, including international adoptees. She found that children with transnational roots were subject to racism manifested as harassment, bullying, violence, stares and racist comments in their everyday interaction with the Finnish majority. In the other Nordic countries, adoption research has paid more attention to racial discrimination experienced by transnational adult adoptees.

These studies have found that despite meeting all the socioeconomic, ethno-cultural, national, and linguistic criteria of belonging to their adoptive countries, the belonging of adoptees continues to be challenged, and because of their non-white appearance they are relegated to a minority category such as “immigrant” or “foreigner” (Brottveitt, 1999; Irhammar & Cederblad, 2000; Sætersdal & Dalen, 2000). Further, the most recent interview studies in Sweden suggested that undue importance has been attributed to the ethnic origin of adoptees by the white Swedish majority population, through curiosity in the form of questions or as outright aggressive racialization (Hällgrän, 2005; Tigervall & Hübinette, 2010; Hübinette & Andersson 2012).

Again, it has been suggested that racism also means exposure to ethnic stereotypes. For instance, Asian adopted females encountered gender-specific sexual stereotyping related to prevailing Western sexualized cultural stereotypes about Asian women (Lindblad & Signell, 2008). To sum up, the most important message of these studies is that the experiences of racism among transnational adoptees in the Nordic countries are common. This in turn poses major challenges

to adoptees' identity development and affects their quality of life, which means that they have to strive much harder than others to become full members of their adoptive countries.

In addition, the previous studies have revealed the difficulties adoptees have in discussing their experiences of racism and prejudice with their family and friends, and how, especially in adulthood, they have to face alone situations where their belonging to their adoptive country is questioned through varied racialized attitudes and/or acts. However, adoptees are not just victims of racism but they also have a variety of strategies for handling it, including sense of humor and staring back, avoiding racist situations, identifying or disidentifying with other minorities, and minimizing their negative emotional reactions (e.g., Rastas, 2002; Lindblad & Signell, 2008). In the Nordic studies, a strategy commonly deployed by adoptees is to highlight their Nordic identity and maintain a distance from immigrants, the aim being to avoid misrecognition owing to the undervalued social position of immigrants. However, this can lead to adoptees not sharing their experiences of racism and ways of coping with it. (See e.g., Brottveit 1999; Irhammar & Cederblad, 2000; Sætersdal & Dalen, 2000.) While the majority of the studies on identity issues as a coping resource have been problem-orientated, other studies have found that feeling that one is different also has its positive sides, although this does not seem to occur much before adulthood (e.g., Rastas, 2002).

Although most international adoptees are well adjusted, quantitative adoption research in Europe and United States has found that many adoptees have lower levels of psychological health compared to the rest of the population (e.g., Juffer & Ijzendoorn, 2005; Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010). Recently, according to Swedish quantitative studies, international adoptees

seem more likely than Swedish-born children to suffer from psychiatric illnesses, criminality and alcohol and drug abuse (Hjern et al., 2002; Vinnerljung et al., 2006; von Borczyskowski et al., 2006). In general, the lower psychic health of adoptees is explained by pre-adoption trauma and separations. However, more attention should be paid to how experiences of racism affect adoptees. Further, studies should pay more attention to the ways adoptees cope with discrimination. This is essential, as several studies have suggested that racial discrimination experiences are associated with negative psychological consequences. Also, the ways in which individuals cope with racism seem to be related to psychological health. (Alvarez & Juan, 2010; Brondolo et al., 2009; Priest et.al, 2012.)

AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

The main purpose of this research was to render visible adult international adoptees' experiences of being racialized and made 'other', an account of having a non-white appearance and/or non-Finnish origin, during the course of their lives. Another important purpose was to identify and discuss the individual reactions caused by discrimination and prejudice along with the strategies adult international adoptees use and have used to cope with perceived racialization and othering.

METHOD

The data for this study were drawn from qualitative face-to-face interviews. Adult international adoptees, 18 years and over were recruited for the interviews in two ways. First, an

advertisement was sent to the publications and websites of Finnish adoption organizations. This procedure yielded five participants. Second, nine subjects were found through snowball sampling, in which the existing study subjects recruited new subjects from among their acquaintances. Altogether, 14 interviews were conducted. Interviews were audio-recorded with the adoptees' permission and transcribed for the purposes of qualitative analysis. The 14 participants comprised five men and nine women, ranging in age from 18 to 30. Their ethnic origins were Ethiopia (6), India (4), Taiwan (2), Colombia (1), and Russia (1). At the time of adoption, they ranged in age from six months to 7 years. With the exception of the participant who had been adopted from Russia, the participants all differed in appearance from the general Finnish population. Five subjects were married, five were dating, one was separated and three were single. Five participants had biological children. The interviewees represented various occupational fields, including among others educationalists, health care specialists, and private entrepreneurs. In general, the adoptees can be described as belonging to the middle or upper-middle class of the Finnish societal hierarchy.

The data were gathered by thematic interviews. In addition to basic demographic data, the interviews focused on the following two main themes: 1) experiences of attitudes and prejudice with probable relation to non-white appearance or non-Finnish origin, and 2) subjective reactions and strategies for dealing with these experiences. Examples of the questions all informants were asked are: 1) what kinds of attitudes and/or acts have you encountered because of your non-white appearance or your non-Finnish background, and 2) how do you deal with these attitudes and acts and their impact?" The interviews were conducted in Finnish and translated into English. Braun and Clarke's (2006) process model of thematic analysis was applied to the data yielded by

the interviews. Experiences of racialization and the coping strategies extracted from the data were classified by theme after coding. Five themes were identified: 1) othering stares and curiosity about adoptees' non-white bodies, 2) encountering racialized stereotypes, 3) racialized name calling and violence, 4) confronting and avoiding coping responses, 4) identification and disidentification as coping resources.

Even if the adoptees did not use words such as racism or did not report their experiences in terms of racism I have nevertheless categorized these experiences as racism if they were connected to the adoptees' non-white appearance or non-Finnish background. Similarly, even if the adoptees did not talk explicitly about coping with racism, I interpreted these experiences as coping strategies if they had to do with reactions to discrimination and prejudice. The interviewees' own words are either incorporated into the text and enclosed in double quotation marks or displayed in a freestanding block of text. To protect the participants' anonymity, real names have been replaced by pseudonyms.

As an adoptive mother, I have understanding of the experiences of racism that adoptees may encounter owing to their non-white appearance. This insider role may offer a researcher special access, but it also presents challenges (see Volkman 2005, 18). As an adoptive parent who belongs to the white majority, I am also an outsider, as I cannot understand experiences that proceed from having a non-white appearance as profoundly as a non-white person. The question also has to be asked: would the interview data have been different and the analysis more critical if the interviewer had had pure insider status or pure outsider status with no personal interest in this phenomenon? However, rather than consider the researcher's status from a dichotomous perspective I have accepted my position as both partial insider and outsider and aimed primarily

to be aware of how my own biases may influence what I am trying to understand (see Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

FINDINGS

Othering stares and curiosity about adoptees' non-white bodies

Identifying someone as different and alien occurs through seeing (Goffman, 1963), and hence stares are a central element in an individual's identity development process and affects how the individual sees her/himself as a member of society (Mead, 1934). All the interviewees, except the one of Russian origin, related to constantly being a target of stares by the white Finnish majority. In public places in particular, such racializing stares constructed adoptees as 'other', that is, as people who do not fit into the domain of white Finnishness. Sometimes, these experiences were felt as a loss of anonymity and unpleasant, even if the stares did not involve insults or violence. Ethiopian-born Maria stated, "Sometimes I have had unpleasant feelings when somebody has ogled me with open interest." Often, othering stares followed exclusionary treatment from strangers in public places (see Tigerwall & Hübinette, 2010). In particular, public transportation was a space in which exclusion was acutely felt by non-white adoptees. Ethiopian-born Sara remembered her journey to school when she was a child: "I was always the last one to have anyone sit next me, if at all." Taiwanese-born Lena related her experience of othering stares and exclusion on her way to school as follows:

There were five empty benches in front of me and behind me and the same emptiness on the other side of the aisle. And from the other end of the bus a crowd of people stared at me quietly. And the same thing happened on the way to school and on the way home.

The adoptees' experiences showed how the targets of such stares learnt what they signified (see Fanon, 1986). As a child, stares were sometimes interpreted as gentle and curious, such as admiration of the type "Oh, what a sweet curly-headed kid". With growing up, stares were perceived as less positive and sometimes even hostile. All the male informants related how their actions and movements were monitored, manifesting an attempt to exert a kind of disciplinary power, the manner of surveillance causing its target to be aware of her or his position in white society (see Foucault, 1977). Indian-born Klaus related how he is often aware of being seen as a potential criminal and how people often attempt to control his actions with looks: "It's not very pleasant when you go to a shop somewhere in a bigger city and you immediately have security guards following you." However, the adoptees often wondered whether this experience was really racism or just their imagination. This doubt seems especially to arise in situations where the racism is more covert than blatant, as it may be in acts of staring. Ethiopian-born Sara offered the following reflection:

Somehow, it's difficult to say what real racism is. Like, what depends on me and what on my skin color. But of course, when you are obviously being followed by security guards in a shop it's not just my personal imagining.

One aspect of ‘not fitting into the normative category of Whiteness’ is needing to be watchful of the reactions that one’s non-white appearance might provoke in new surroundings, as also observed in a Swedish interview study with young people from a minority background (Hällgrän, 2005). Adoptees seem to be particularly conscious of their difference and prepared for possible racism, especially when their living contexts change. Ethiopian-born Tina described how, with growing up, a change of job, for example, is a situation in which she is prepared for the worst and how she easily connects people’s possible unfriendliness with her non-white appearance.

When I was younger I didn’t think that there is anything wrong with me and I thought that people reacted to me normally. But nowadays I’m somehow aware of it. With friends I’m not worried but when I start in a new workplace I’m surprised when they react to me so positively. If somebody is a bit unfriendly to me I think it’s because of my skin color.

Racialized stares were often followed with questions about the adoptee’s relations to Finland, such as “Where do you come from?”, “How is it that you speak such good Finnish?”, “How do you like living in Finland?” These kinds of questions often gave rise to a mixture of irritation and amusement among the adoptees, as in most cases they had no memories of living anywhere else. Further, these questions seem to contain an obvious presumption that because their appearance does not fit into the domain of Whiteness, they don’t fundamentally belong to Finnish society.

Although all the interviewees in this study considered their identity to be wholly Finnish, their Finnishness was continuously questioned and they were often categorized as refugees or

immigrants, a phenomenon which has been noted in practically all studies based on interviews with adult international adoptees in the Nordic welfare states (e.g., Brottveit 1999; Irhammar & Cederblad, 2000; Lindblad & Signell, 2008; Sætersdal & Dalen, 2000). This paradox between the inner and external identification of international adoptees, especially in the case of transracial adoptees, puts them into the category of ‘other’ and may lead them to doubt their Finnishness.

Ethiopian-born Heidi reflected on this situation as follows:

So there’s a conflict because you identify yourself as Finnish but you don’t look like a Finn. Even though you consider yourself a Finn, the people around you don’t consider you one. I remember how I sometimes wondered during the spring festival at school whether it’s okay for me to sing the Finnish national anthem. I wasn’t sure if I was a true Finn in the eyes of others.

However, even when their Finnishness was evident on account of their native Finnish language and adoption status, the revelation of the latter obliged the adoptees to disclose further details of their personal life, while occasionally they were asked questions like “Why did your real parent abandon you?”, “How does it feel to be adopted?” or “Are you going to find your real parents?” Such repeated and one-sided intrusions into one’s personal life were sometimes experienced as frustrating, because the adoptees were often posed questions of the kind that strangers do not usually ask each other, and also in less intimate situations, such as in check-outs queues, classrooms and restaurants. Even if people’s curiosity was not considered mal-intentioned, social interactions like this may underline feelings of oneself as ‘other’, as adoptees

are automatically classified as different on the basis of their adoption status (see March, 1995). Indian-born Robin reflected on how his adoption status always precedes him as a person.

These questions always arise during new phases of life and in new relationships. In principle, I'll gladly tell if I'm asked about it. But when you meet new people and they immediately start asking it feels as if my background comes before my personality. It would be more natural to ask such private things only after getting to know someone more deeply.

In addition, through curiosity about adoptees' background or ethnic origin, adoptees were often singled out among their friends, classmate and colleagues, which again may intensify the feeling of being 'other', as Ethiopian-born Sara stated:

Sometimes a teacher would ask in the middle of a lesson, 'Now, tell us something about your ethnicity'. So they always take notice of me, no one else is asked such things. When they realize that I'm different, they start asking about where I come from, and if I answer that I'm from (the name of adoptee's home city) it's not enough, and if I say that I'm from Ethiopia it's not enough either.

Merging with the white dominant population in one's appearance saves the adoptee from stares and curiosity and seems to increase the adoptee's privacy, as in the case of the Russian-origin Lisa, who had more of a chance to choose where and to whom she told about her background. Lisa explained how concealing her background increases her privacy: "If I say that I'm from

Russia, I have to explain why I live in Finland and what happened to me. And these are not facts I want to tell everyone.”

Encountering racialized stereotypes

One way of being rendered ‘other’, which some informants experienced, was through the use of colonialist stereotypes; these are simplified representations of an ethnic group which do not take account of the normal differences between individuals (see Hall, 1999). For example, Ethiopian-born Maria had experienced how her African origins were associated with athleticism and an inborn sense of rhythm. As Maria’s quotation shows, such stereotypes are not always received as blatant forms of racism and are not always hurtful. However, racialized stereotypes are implicit and subtle reminders that adoptees are ‘others’, in White Finnish society and because of their physical bodies are perceived as fundamentally bound to their ethnic and cultural origins.

Sometimes I’m supposed to be good at sports and have a good sense of rhythm because of my African background. This makes me really laugh as I’m so much the opposite of this, because I’m so rubbish at both of these.

Class, ‘race’ and sexuality interact and often shape the experiences of women of color. Further, the notion of gender equality is central to defining who belongs to the nation and who does not (Mulinari et.al., 2009.) Ethiopian-born Tina reported being categorized as a poor immigrant woman who does not belong to the Finnish welfare society. This misleading representation made

her angry: “Such a generalization is so irritating. As if I were a bum who just has children here, sits at home and collects welfare.” The colonialized image of African women as lacking competence as workers may also have implications for women of color in their everyday work (see Yanick & Feagin, 1997). Ethiopian-born Maria stated how she has to work harder than others to gain approval: “You have to be twice as good as and even more diligent than the others. You have to earn the respect that you can manage well in your job, despite the fact that you are different.”

Also, sexualized racialization directed towards women of color has its roots in colonialism, where native women in the colonies were perceived as always accessible for white men, and it continues to be reinforced in media images (Stoler, 2002). Some female adoptees in this study reported experiences in which their non-white features were associated with sexual exoticism and permissiveness, as also found in a Swedish interview study with adopted women of Asian origin (Lindblad & Signell, 2008). Taiwanese-born Lena expressed this idea as follows:

Often middle-aged or older men approach me and try to buy me drinks. They appear to be trying to be gentlemen in order to get close. And then I notice how they try to undress me with their gazes, which is so disgusting. And this also happened when I was a teenager.

Similarly, Indian-born Anna’s experience shows how non-white females are often considered to mature sexually at a younger age than their white peers, so rendering their sexual integrity more vulnerable. Further, her experience reflects how non-whiteness is associated with sexual exoticism and may, more acutely, arouse the interest of the opposite sex.

I think that Asian women are considered as a sex object much earlier than other women. I remember when on the way to school older guys would come up to me and say what pretty tits I have. That was so irritating. And I remember my first boyfriend, who was mainly interested in me because of my dark skin and was dating me for the wrong reasons.

However, if a non-white adoptee woman was spared being treated as a sexual object, she may have encountered sexual harassment vicariously through her general knowledge of sexualized racialization or through the experiences of other women of color (see Essed, 1991). Ethiopian-born Tina related that although she had not been an object of sexualized racialization, she was aware of how other women of color are demeaned.

I have friends who think I'm absolutely ok, because they know me. But then for example in the disco where they see other dark-skinned women they are like 'Who the hell are those fucking sluts throwing themselves at men here.'

Sexualized racialization in Finland is not restricted to women of color alone, but is a general experience among women of Russian origin. This racialization rests on the wide-spread media image of Russian women as immigrant prostitutes and mail order wives (Puuronen, 2011). Although Russian-born Lisa had not encountered blatant sexualized stereotypes, she had vicarious knowledge of the sexist images some Finns have of Russian women. Moreover, people of Russian origin tend to be associated with aggression, criminality and insanitariness (Puuronen, 2011). Racialized images like these caused Lisa to hide her background: "Mostly I don't want to

mention my Russian background because you know what Finnish people may think about Russians.”

All the present male informants reported being targets of racism based on assumptions about race and gendered roles, and on the myth of the dangerous Black man (Essed, 1991). Through this colonialism-based racialization and criminalization, which are also reinforced in popular culture, men of color are identified as ‘other’ (see Gilroy, 1991). An experience shared by all the male informants was of being assumed to be potentially criminal, as manifested by their being targets of suspicion by security guards, police, and shop detectives. Indian-born Robin recalled a situation where he was among his white friends and how just he was picked up and put in a police car.

I remember after graduation when we were celebrating, sitting and drinking beer in the park, when the police came, and of course it was me they took into the police car whereas my friends were left alone.

Racialized name calling and violence

Although, the word ‘nigger’, usually known as the N-word because of its racist connotation, is considered offensive in the other Western countries, in the Nordic region this word continues to be used, the rationale being that the Nordic countries were outside of the colonial project and consequently the use of the N-word in the Nordic context is not racist (Hübinette, 2012; Rastas,

2007). However, the term ‘nigger’ was the most general racist label encountered by all the adoptees except Russian-born Lisa. Ethiopian-born Sara remembered how as a child she was called a ‘nigger’, seemingly with no explicit or conscious desire to hurt.

Sometimes as a child when I was in a supermarket, mothers might whisper to their children, ‘Look, honey, there’s a cute little nigger girl over there’. Or then children might say to their mother, ‘Look, mum there’s a nigger girl over there’.

However, use of the N-word is mostly a blatant form of racism with the explicit intention to hurt. For the non-white adoptive informants it was an everyday experience whether or not their roots were in Africa. Indian-born Klaus stated, “You always have to hear shouts of nigger.” Often, use of the N-word and other racist insults were encountered vicariously as the adoptees were considered to possess Finnishness due to their adoptive background whereas other non-white people were talked about in demeaning ways. Indian-born Robin related how he felt the use of the N-word hurtful, even though it was not directed at him, “My friends use the word ‘nigger’ a lot, and when they see I’m hurt, they say, ‘Of course we didn’t mean you’.” Similarly, Ethiopian-born Elisa remembered watching a TV show with her friends who were laughing at a black woman singer and calling her a ‘nigger’, behaviour which she found offensive. Even where adoptees are not addressed by racialized names, they may nevertheless experience a psychological threat owing to their awareness that other people of color are perceived as inferior (see Matsuda et. al., 1993).

Sometimes words closely related to the N-word are used “in a positive meaning”, as in children’s songs, plays and books (Vuorela, 2009). An example of this is ‘Who’s afraid of the black man’ which used to be a popular children’s game in Finland. However innocent this game may be considered by white adults, it is loaded with covert associations linking the ‘black man’ with frightening traits. Indian-born Henry memorized how he was mostly picked to be the ‘black man’ from among his schoolmates.

At school we often played “Who’s afraid of the black man”. So, the teacher always chose me to be the ‘black man’. But I didn’t have any bad feelings about that, as it was just a funny game. And I’m sure the teacher didn’t mean anything bad by it; he just may have been a bit thoughtless.

Again, white appearance does not always protect against racializing insults or acts, the case of Russian-born Lisa shows. In Finland, various racializing discourses are current in which people of Russian origin are derogated and excluded from the domain of Finnishness (Puuronen, 2011). One of the most commonly used insults is ‘Russki’ of which Lisa was also the target from time to time and which she found offensive.

Though I didn’t differ from my class mates in my appearance or in any other ways except that I came from Russia. And when the boys who had been my class mates in primary school knew my background they shouted after me ‘Russian’ or ‘Russki’.

Physical assault was, in the experience of the adoptees, the worst possible manifestation of racism. Ethiopian-born Tina stated how the other forms of racism were easier to tolerate “as long as they don’t touch me.” However, even if only a few of the adoptees had experienced physical violence, they felt that the threat of it had increased as they grew up and moved in wider social contexts. Indian-born Henry related experiences where his life was threatened: “Twice a knife was held to my throat and once somebody tried to run me down in a car.” Indian-born Anna described her experience of a physical attack accompanied with offensive name calling.

The worst experience when I was physically harassed happened in the middle of the day in a shopping center. It was a truly unbelievable situation. A quite ordinary Finnish woman got into my face and said, ‘You damn nigger whore!’, and then she hit me with her fist. At first I began to laugh, because the situation was so absurd. But later I started to cry because I felt so hurt.

However, subtle forms of racism can be more hurtful than blatant forms of racism, as they are difficult to identify, which in turn makes it more difficult to attribute them to external causes and so blame the perpetrators (Yoo, Lee & Steger, 2010). Anna described a situation in which she simultaneously perceived a blatant form of racism by those who were insulting her and a subtle form of racism in the fact that she was left alone without any help from outsiders. Anna felt the latter of the two more offensive.

Situations in the local train, when the whole carriage is full of Finns, fair-skinned, and me. And then there's a group of three men insulting me. And surely everyone can see what's going on – no one can avoid hearing it. But they just hide behind their newspapers or mobile phones. The worst thing isn't those who are shouting but those who don't do anything to help me.

Confronting and avoiding coping responses

Being a target of racism and prejudice often evoked anger and frustration among the informants which they sometimes expressed by staring back at or replying to the perpetrators. An expression of anger, in particular, can be used to motivate perpetrators to change their behavior or attitude (Swim et. al., 2003). Among a few adoptive informants, being aggressive was a seemingly not only a consequence of, but also a strategy by which they stopped attempts at bullying by classmates. Taiwanese-born Mikael stated how as a child he turned to fighting to avoid being bullied: "When I was younger, I fought with the bullies. If I hadn't they would never have stopped." Indian-born Henry remembered how after one racist attack he expressed his anger by an act of revenge: "I was so angry that I spray-painted the walls of the police station." Again, to Ethiopian-born Elisa, being foul-mouthed was in her own words a consequence of racism, but it can also be seen as a strategy to protect herself.

I've developed a hard shell that is typical of the adoptive child, and which would probably not exist without these experiences. In practice I'm seen as quite foul-mouthed. It's challenging to spare people when I haven't been spared myself.

As a child some adoptees had received concrete advice from their parents about how to respond both to friendly questions and to blatant racist speech. Ethiopian-born Tina stated,

Father taught me that I'm not a nigger but dark-skinned. When I was called a nigger at school, I responded coolly: 'So, if you think I'm a nigger it's your problem.' Of course these answers practiced beforehand sounded a bit precocious, but sometimes they really worked and the bullies stopped calling me names.

Also, in adulthood Tina defended herself by replying to the perpetrators if possible. She reflected on an encounter in which she was stereotyped as a poor low-class immigrant woman that is, not treated as an individual but as a representative of a group that she did not want to be identified with. She handled this situation by correcting this stereotypical assumption with anger.

I was in the lift with my children, and there were two old ladies. They were looking at me and one of them said, 'Two kids already and certainly a third is on its way.' I replied, 'Good day. I understood what you said. My motherhood isn't any of your business. I pay taxes and I pay for your pensions and retirement homes, so I expect some respect from you.'

Personal confrontation as direct protest or talking to the perpetrator may in some cases moderate the effects of discrimination on depression (Noh et. al., 1999; Alvarez & Juan, 2010). However, there are lots of situations where direct expressions of anger are inhibited because of anxiety about social abandonment. In such cases, expressions of anger can be used to motivate significant others to take action and emotionally share the burden related to experiences of racism (Brondolo et.al., 2009). Some informants related how they seldom rage against the perpetrators but mostly act up with those closest to them. For example, Ethiopian-born Maria described a situation where she initially suppressed her anger about racism she had encountered within the family sphere, but later expressed her feelings to her spouse.

My husband's granny was prejudiced against me because I'm 'such a foreigner'. She was close to death when I met her for the first time and still she had such a negative attitude to me. My husband's relatives noticed it and felt sorry about it. So, what else could I have said then than 'Oh, it doesn't matter.' But afterwards I told to my spouse directly what I thought about it.

Consequently, it is necessary to consider the context in which the racist conflict occurs when examining the possible cost and benefits of expressions of anger or direct confrontation (Brondolo et.al., 2009). Most of the adoptee informants told how the threat of more serious conflict constrained their responses directly to the perpetrators, and how avoiding confrontation

had its benefits in seeking to prevent violent consequences. Ethiopian-born Heidi related how the context of a conflict affects one's response to it.

It depends on who is being derogatory, and how and where they do it. Mostly it goes in one ear and out the other. But if there's a bigger threat it's not worth getting involved and ending up in a fight. So, if you see skinheads, you don't confront them but you just try to be silent or inattentive. But if it's related to work or something bigger, then at those moments I would defend myself. But mostly I don't care and don't shout back.

Further, experiencing blatant forms of racism was so surprising and felt so acute that there was no time to react to them with anger, even if one wanted to. Ethiopian-born Tina described such sudden events and the frustration following them.

Sometimes it's like being hit head-on. It comes so suddenly that you are left with your mouth open when some louts shout 'fucking ape' or something out the car window. At first I'm wondering who they are calling names and afterward I realize that it's me of course. So, I don't care because it takes so much out of you.

Ethiopian-born Maria reflected, "In those sudden situations I'm not able to say a word. But afterwards a lot of things that I could have said occur to me." Similarly, Taiwanese-born Lena described a moment when she felt the threat of racist violence: "At first it was pure fear and anger came afterwards." As a consequence, anger suppression may lead to rumination-related

behaviors, and cause depression in the long run (Swim et.al., 2003). In addition, individuals with lower power or status are more likely to suppress anger than those with high power (Noh et al. 1999). In childhood, especially, the informants seemed to have fewer strategies for coping with racism, and sometimes just resorted to avoiding reactions. Russian-born Lisa related how as a child she hid her feelings and pretended indifference when she was bullied: “I pretended I didn’t hear them calling me names.” Again, Indian-born Klaus felt that because he was not particularly big, this hindered him from expressing his anger: “I wondered what would have happened if I had put my foot down. I’m not a very big guy either, so I may have been beaten.” On the contrary, Columbia-born Daniel related how he could not resist his impulses and how he instantly reacted to the bullying: “They didn’t have to say much to me before I charged at them.” However, when he reached teenage he saw no choice but to move away from his home city; this was obviously a consequence of racism, but it can also be seen as an extreme form of avoidance. Daniel stated: “I don’t know if I wanted to leave, but there was no way I could stay where I grew up. After nine years of bullying I thought it would be better to go to some other city.”

Responding to perpetrators can also be done with humor, as reported by some of the adoptees. While humor related to negative images of an ethnic group may, when employed by the dominant culture, put its members’ identity at risk (see Rastas, 2002), humor that ironizes racist attitudes or actors may be empowering. Indian-born Klaus described a particularly effective use of ironic humor: “My classmate asked me if my mother had kept me in the oven too long. I asked if his mother had kept him in the freezer too long. After this, he didn’t tease me anymore.”

Individuals can also confront racism by blaming discrimination rather than oneself, which may buffer self-esteem, especially when the discrimination is blatant rather than covert (Kaiser & Miller, 2001). All of the informants believed that racism was primarily the perpetrator's problem, not theirs. Ethiopian-born Elisa stated, "If I'm called a nigger it tells more about the heckler than me." In particular, unemployment, low or no education and old age were seen in particular as connected with blatant racism, such as name calling. It was believed that racism was attributable to the perpetrators' lives not being on track. When racism was not seen as a result of the adoptees' personal characteristics, it was easier to consider it unmerited, as described by Indian-born Anna:

I just refuse to think that I'm to blame if people call me names. The first thing is to realize that it's unfair and wrong. I just think it's not my fault when people call me names. And somehow, I have never taken it personally, which must be a good thing.

The main support that most of the informants had received as a child from their adoptive parents was that the latter had emphasized that discrimination was not the adoptee's personal problem, but the perpetrator's. The adoptees had also often been advised not to care about discrimination and prejudice (see Rastas, 2009). Indian-born Henry stated, "They said that you shouldn't care about it. But they shouldn't have said that because of course it hurts."

Identification and disidentification as coping resources

Ethno-cultural identity which is based on being a member of a group and identification with its values can also be seen as a tool for coping with racism, as it is capable of buffering the effects of stress (Phinney et al., 2001). In this study, all of the informants seemed to identify themselves primarily as Finnish in culture, values, lifestyle and traditions. This phenomenon is congruent with the findings of other Scandinavian adoption studies (Brottveit 1999; Howell, 2006; Irhammar & Cederblad, 2000; Sætersdal & Dalen, 2000). One main element in the adoptees' Finnish identity seemed to be a strong sense of belonging to a circle of friends of Finnish origin, as through this the adoptees were included in the domain of Finnishness. In youth this membership meant sometimes concrete protection against blatant forms of racism. Indian-born Henry explained it in this way:

When there were always seven friends around you, you didn't have to be afraid of anything. Actually, my friends have protected me by using violence and I have to admit that I don't feel any sorry about it. However, it's not reasonable anymore nowadays.

However, the adoptees seldom seemed to seek emotional support from their native Finnish friends, believing that friends who were part of the white Finnish majority would not fundamentally be able to understand the adoptees' experiences of racism. Ethiopian-born Ella stated, "They just can't understand what it's like to be in my shoes."

Language is one of the strongest markers of cultural identity, and once it was noticed that the adoptees spoke perfect Finnish, the attitude towards them often became freer of tension and they were easily accepted into the domain of Finnishness. Columbian-born Daniel stated, “When they realize I’m Finnish they are like ‘I see, well that’s all right then.’ And then most people have a changed understanding of me.” Respectively, Ethiopian-born Tina described the meaning of language, having a Finnish name and cultural practices.

When I speak perfect Finnish without the slightest foreign accent and tell them my name their jaws drop and the prejudices disappear. Well, you can certainly see whether people are Finnish or not, all their manners and clothing and how they speak Finnish.

Furthermore, adoption status seems to be a crucial factor which diminishes the significance of the adoptees’ non-whiteness and makes them easier to read as Finnish. Ethiopian-born Maria explained the meaning of being adopted, and how the word ‘adoption’ became a ‘magic word’ that prevented her from being confused with immigrants and changed peoples’ attitude to her. However, this ‘magic word’ was often followed by loss of privacy as mentioned earlier

Because the word ‘adoption’ always saves me from everything. It’s a magic word – ‘So you’re adopted, but that’s wonderful’ – and then you hear a big sigh. So then the attitude will always be positive; it has never been negative.

Ethno-cultural identity is a significant element in personal identity, especially in adolescence when individuals are more involved in the social life around them and acquire knowledge of the dominant culture and its values. (Phinney, 2001). One main impression gained from the interviews was a desire on the part of the adoptees to be differentiated from immigrants and from people of their country of origin. This can probably be attributed to the adoptees' awareness of the inferior social position of immigrants in Finland. Furthermore, observing other non-white people suffering from racism may reduce feelings of identification with the group. One example of this disidentification can be seen in the case of Russian-born Lisa, who often concealed her birth origin from both the ethnic Finnish majority and other Russian-born people: "I don't tell them about my background and neither do they." However, *passing* as a means of escaping stigma leads to a distance in relationships and is an obstacle to potential sources of social support (see Goffman, 1963). Disidentification with immigrants can be seen at its strongest in the words used by Ethiopian-born Ella.

If there are other dark-skinned people nearby I feel this somehow very strange. It's a fraught situation when they come to talk with me, although it's understandable because they think that I come from the same culture. I uncompromisingly don't want to be mixed up with them; and I don't have any dark-skinned friends. Well, maybe nowadays I could but previously I was terror-stricken if I was misrecognized as one of them.

Although most of the informants did not want to be misrecognized as immigrants or people of the same ethnic origin, some of them nevertheless reported that the presence of other children

representing ethnic minorities or who had the same ethnic origin reduced the feeling of being different and may also have prevented bullying. Ethiopian-born Elisa recounted her relief at not being the only non-white: “It was good that I wasn’t the only dark-skinned one at school.”

Furthermore, some adoptees expressed a strong sense of solidarity with other international adoptees and emotionally shared the burden of being a target of discrimination with an adoptee friend or an adoptee sibling. One important form of social support for a few informants was being an active member in the Association of Adult International Adoptees. Taiwanese-born Mikael, for example, stated, “There we can meet others in the same situation and discuss what being adopted means, and of course also what discrimination means.” This kind of group identification may provide stigmatized people with a sense of belonging and with emotional and informational social support (Major & O’Brien, 2005).

Even if the adoptees wanted to avoid misrecognition, this did not automatically mean that they were prepared to deny their origin. In fact, most of the informants spoke of their pride in their ethnic and cultural origin, which could also be a strategy to deal with experiences of racism (see Lind, 2012). Again, with respect to physical appearance the adoptees reported that they mainly identified themselves with the people of the same origin. This may exemplify the concept of ‘double identity’, where adoptees may feel Finnish but also identify themselves on some level with their country of origin (see Howell, 2006). Alternatively, it may be explained through the concept of hybrid identity, where people are not bounded by any specific identity but can move between different ethnicities and cultures (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992; Hall, 1999). An example of these several dimensions of identity can be seen in the account given by Ethiopian-born Heidi.

Sometimes I wonder whether I should feel Ethiopian? Now, I don't feel Ethiopian although my appearance is Ethiopian of course. But when I see Ethiopian women I'm very interested in them like, 'Wow they look just like me', and it's nice to see how they do their hair and make-up. Well, in some ineradicable way I'll always be Ethiopian, although at the same time I feel a hundred percent Finnish.

One reason for taking pride in one's origin and difference may be that many adoptees felt that being different from others had brought more advantages than disadvantages, as they have also received positive attention and had more opportunities for new friendships (see Rastas, 2002; Lindblad & Signell, 2008). Taiwanese-born Mikael stated, "You easily stay in people's minds and it's easier to become acquainted with people". Also, non-whiteness can be a desirable feature in a white society and associated with valued and admired traits. In Indian-born Henry's youth and among his friends hip-hop culture was very popular and associated with a dark skin. Henry recalled, "All my friends wanted so desperately to be hip hops and then I had a feature of this culture that they lacked." However difference as a desirable feature seems usually to emerge on the threshold of adulthood. In addition, along with maturation it seems to be possible for adoptees to find a balance between their Finnish identity and their feelings about their ethnic origin and adoption background, as also found in a Norwegian follow-up study of adult adoptees (Sætersdal & Dalen, 2000). An example of this is how Russian-born Lisa came to understand her difference as a positive factor in her life.

It's the fact that I am different, that I'm allowed be different. Somewhere along the way, you reach the age where it is preferable to be different from than similar to others. I become a bit more interesting in some way perhaps, because something unusual had happened to me in my life, and of course it has enriched my life.

CONCLUSION

This interview study explored experiences of racializing and othering and the strategies used to cope with these among 14 adult international adoptees in Finland. This research contributes to the growing literature on international adoptees, in particular to knowledge about how they are excluded in the Nordic welfare states. In addition, this study adds to understanding of the variety of ways in which individual adoptees cope with experiences of racism. The findings are in many ways consistent with those of the previous Nordic studies on experiences of racism among international adoptees (e.g., Lindbald & Signell, 2008; Tigervall & Hübnette, 2010) and with Finnish studies on immigrants' experiences of racism, where non-whites are excluded and made 'other' through both covert and aggressive overt racialization (e.g., Rastas, 2009).

However, this study suggests that international adoptees may encounter more indirect and subtle forms of racialization, as they are often included in the domain of Finnishness through their adoption status and their Finnish identity, including their Finnish language, names and other Finnish cultural practices. Thus, what is peculiar to the racialization experiences of adoptees is that racialization often seems to occur vicariously through their general awareness of the undervalued position of immigrants and through witnessing the underestimation and racialization

of other non-white peoples. Furthermore, subtle forms of racialization also often seem to be perpetrated by significant others, which may hinder direct confrontation owing to fear of social abandonment.

Moreover, this study emphasizes the context-specific nature of coping, which comprises a broad range of responses and is also dependent on the individual's personal resources as well as the social contexts in which racialization and othering conflicts occur. Accordingly, identity consists of complex ways of representing and positioning oneself within larger social constructs and is intertwined with racial, social class, gender and cultural differences. Moreover, the adoptees' accounts illustrate how racializing, othering, classing, sexing, and gendering discourses and practices become central moments in identity formation and complicate adoptees' self-identification. However, not all such practices are necessarily negative. Being different and/or being seen as different can also be an advantage and become a positive element of individual's identity.

As a research approach, the interview was an appropriate way to obtain individual experiences of experiences of racialization and coping that are multidimensional and context-specific in nature. . However, the number of participants was small, and contained only one Russian origin adoptee. Further, the adoptees, who were primarily contacted through adoption organizations, may have more concerns about their identity at that particular point in time. For these reasons, their experiences should not be generalized to all international adoptees in Finland. To gain a fuller understanding on this topic, further research should use larger samples of international adoptees. Larger samples, along with a quantitative approach, would enable the study of a number of important issues: the psychological impact of experiences of racism; how

different coping strategies are related to racism-related distress; and how such information as gender, socioeconomic situation, and number of children, age, and birth origin are associated with experiences of racism and related coping strategies. However, the strongest conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that there is an urgent need to develop effective methods of reducing discrimination and protecting the health of targeted groups.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that coping with racism should not be placed on the shoulders of the targeted individuals only but that interventions involve all levels of society. Therefore, the findings suggest that adoptive parents and professionals working with adoptive families should be made more aware of the variety of ways in which racism is experienced among adoptees and how this may affect their identity and well-being. Thus, this study suggests that more attention should be paid to such subtle forms of racism, as they often operate implicitly, unconsciously, and often in the intimate context of life, and consequently are more difficult to cope with. Also, the multidimensional and context-specific nature of coping should be taken noticed when discussing how to support adoptees to develop strategies to cope with racism. The present findings may therefore aid adoption professionals when developing interventions to educate adoptive parents about how to discuss racial inequalities and ways of coping with them. Moreover, in addition to its targets, racism also dehumanizes those who articulate it. Therefore, it is desirable that those who constitute the majority population in Finland become more conscious of how their speech and behavior can exclude people from the domain of Finnishness. To sum up, it is hoped that being Finnish could extend beyond whiteness to include people of non-white appearance and from non-Finnish backgrounds.

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