

CHAPTER 1

Korean Adoptees in America

To hear Caleb Littell recount the story, life was good growing up during the 1980s.¹ Adopted as an infant from South Korea, Caleb joined a loving family consisting of his parents and, a few years later, a sister, Holly, also adopted from Korea. John and Deborah Littell raised their children in the predominantly white suburb of Renton, Washington, just outside of Seattle. Deborah, an attorney, and John, the director of a nonprofit as well as a minister, chose Korea because of its reputation as a reputable source of healthy children. Caleb was the answer to their dreams, and his arrival was cause for a grand celebration: “It was a *huge* deal [Caleb’s emphasis]. I think that they were pretty open about my mother not being able to have children. . . . The whole family came out there, and when I arrived home, everybody came over to see me with gifts and this and that, and so it was a pretty big production.” As his words convey, Caleb grew up surrounded by love and knowing that he was fiercely wanted by his parents.

Still, despite a “borderline picture-perfect” childhood, Caleb increasingly struggled to make sense of who he was and what it meant to him and others to be Korean, Asian, and adopted by white parents. To be sure, his difficulties did not start at home, but when he stepped outside the front door. By the time Caleb was nine or ten, “Oriental” jokes and “Asian” jokes were a regular occurrence in the schoolyard as well as on the streets. The teasing not only hurt Caleb but confused him because, among family, being Asian was an interesting but

largely irrelevant part of his identity. In fact, Caleb mainly identified with his white family and friends, who were at a loss as to how to support him when he was made fun of for being racially different. His parents made efforts to connect their children to Korea and its culture, but they largely followed the children's lead, choosing to expose rather than impose. As for the taunting, they urged their son to accept his differences and not get so riled up, a response that did little to assuage Caleb's growing hurt and anger. "What I think is, they had no clue of what was in store for them as far as the identity crisis as I became older, through the preteen era and through my teens," Caleb said. By fifteen, his challenges came to a head as, to use his own words, he hardened and numbed himself to the teasing. "In fact, in my opinion, adolescents have adolescent problems that they go through. And I think mine were to the extreme where I pushed my family and my parents and my sister away." From about age fifteen to twenty-one, Caleb said, he "wouldn't go to family functions . . . lots of substance abuse, was in a gang, a wannabe gang, when I was younger. Lot of trouble, was in jail a couple of times."

Now fast approaching his thirties and at a good stage in his life, Caleb reflected on why, as an adolescent, he was drawn to a lifestyle that emulated a bad Hollywood movie involving armed robbery, drugs, frequent danger, and, eventually, a stint in rehab:

I didn't know why I was doing it. Again, this is all reflecting. I didn't know why I was self-destructing, why I was living the life that I did. But looking back now, I realize it was because I was scared. I didn't want any—I didn't want to get teased like that again. . . . So I hung out with people [with whom] that just wasn't going to be an issue.

Caleb's story, while extreme in its trajectory, captures many of the unique elements of the Korean adoptee experience: loving white families who are ill prepared to aid their Asian children as they encounter racial prejudice; discomfort over being a visible minority in predominantly white communities; and confusion over the meaning of being Korean, Asian, and adopted by white parents. While clearly an outlier in terms of his response, the conditions that Caleb faced as a transnational and transracial adoptee are familiar to many Korean adoptees.

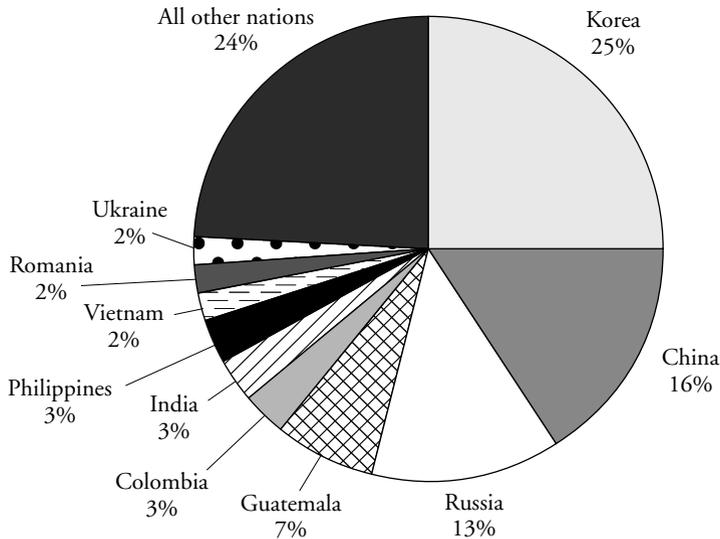
In this book, we examine the experiences of Korean adoptees in the United States. Our study includes members of the "pioneer" generation—those who

were among the first to be raised by white families in the aftermath of the Korean War—as well as adoptees like Caleb Littell who arrived a generation or two later. Four central questions guide our study of this exceptional population. First, how do Korean adoptees learn about their racial and ethnic identities when their parents and kin are white? Second, what variables lead some adoptees to embrace their ethnic and racial identities while others remain indifferent or reject them altogether? Furthermore, how does ethnic exploration, or the absence of it, vary by life stage and circumstance? Third, how do Korean adoptees choose to identify, and what meanings do they attach to those identities? And finally, how does the study of Korean adoption contribute to our understanding of the significance of race, ethnicity, and group identity in the United States? More specifically, how does it contribute to our understanding of the Asian American experience?

Before proceeding further, some definitions are in order. By race we mean the visible physical markers (skin color, facial features, hair texture, and so on) that are used to sort individuals into broad ancestral groupings (such as black, white, Asian, Native American, or Latino) and have long been the object of social use and abuse in the United States. Like most sociologists, we view race as a social construction rooted in social, economic, and political processes (Omi and Winant 1994). Nevertheless, race has very real and tangible consequences in people's lives because it informs where they are located in a larger hierarchy of power, privilege, and preference. By ethnicity we mean the specific ancestral groupings (such as African American, Haitian, German, Irish, Korean, or Chinese) that are used to sort individuals into cultures, often nation-based, with distinct practices (linguistic, aesthetic, culinary, and so on) and beliefs. As scholars interested in identity development, we focus our work on how individuals relate to the racial and ethnic groupings to which they are assigned, the ways in which they pursue ethnic exploration, and the factors that influence or diminish identity salience for them.

Korean adoptees are an important population for scholars interested in racial and ethnic identity development to consider. On the one hand, they are raised deep within white mainstream culture because of their family circumstances. On the other hand, they are racial minorities in a racially stratified society. Korean adoptees provide scholars with a valuable opportunity to observe identity construction with a unique population for whom the “natural” transference of racial and ethnic knowledge between parent and child cannot be assumed. How are race and ethnicity learned when Korean adoptees grow up

Figure 1.1 Cumulative International Adoptions into the United States, 1948 to 2009



Source: Authors' compilation based on Altstein and Simon (1991) (for 1963 to 1987, total adoptions: 137,437) and U.S. Department of State (2010) (for FY1989 to FY2009, total adoptions: 290,958); 1988 data are unavailable.

Note: Data for "all other nations" from the U.S. Department of State include only the top twenty or more source countries and therefore are an underestimate.

in white families and communities where there are few Asians? In the absence of the "natural" opportunities of a coethnic family, what avenues do Korean adoptees pursue to explore their heritage, and what exactly do they learn about race and ethnicity?

Since 1948, roughly half of all individuals who were adopted as children from outside the United States have come from Asia; they represent the largest fraction of the 11,000 to 22,000 children who have migrated annually over the last decade to join their American families (Krieder 2003; U.S. Department of State 2008). While China has dominated since 2000 as the leading source of adoptable Asian children, South Korea alone accounts for 25 percent of all children ever adopted from abroad (see figure 1.1). Because Korean placements stretch back to the end of the Korean War, there are more adoptees from Korea than any other country. By some estimates, somewhere between

120,000 and 160,000 Korean adoptees currently reside in the United States, ranging in age from infancy to their fifties. This age range is important to emphasize because compared to contemporary Chinese adoptees, the oldest of whom have just entered adolescence, most Korean adoptees grew up under very different social and historical circumstances. Even adoptees like Caleb came of age when the Internet was primarily a military and higher education network, adoptee associations and resources (books, heritage camps, motherland tours) were less common, and the promotion of multiculturalism within the family was barely gaining momentum. Keeping in mind the historically specific periods during which the practice of Korean-white adoption arose and then matured, the pioneering experiences of this population serve as an important theoretical and empirical benchmark for studying Asian-white adoption more broadly.

Korean adoptees are also an understudied *Asian American* population. While scholars in psychology and social work have extensively assessed adoptee social adjustment and other developmental issues (physical, language, cognitive, self-concept, psychosocial), research linking adoptee experiences to the broader Asian American experience has been lacking. What challenges faced by adoptees are generally shared with other Asian Americans? Evidence of rising anti-Asian sentiment, combined with the perception that Asians, irrespective of generational status, are “forever foreigners,” poses hurdles that all Asian Americans face in developing healthy racial identities in the United States (Lowe 1996; Tuan 1998). Yet there has been no exploration of how these challenges might be exacerbated or mitigated because an Asian American has white parents. Are Asian adoptees more or less race-conscious because they have grown up in white families? Are the ways in which they develop identity and coping strategies for dealing with racism different from those of Asian Americans raised by biological parents? These are additional questions informing the direction of this study.

As our book title suggests, we believe that Korean adoptees have significant choice concerning the degree to which ethnicity matters in their private lives, the question of whether to engage in ethnic exploration, and the types of exploration they can pursue. Race, on the other hand, is significant precisely because it is not a private matter. Whether they consciously embrace their racial identity or not, adoptees still must negotiate the expectations, judgments, and stereotypes that others have of them based on their racial status. In this regard, they have much in common with their non-adopted Asian American counterparts. We have argued elsewhere (Tuan 1998) that even Asian ethnics with roots

stretching back several generations struggle to be embraced as legitimate Americans because of long-held racial stereotypes portraying Asians as perpetually foreign. How Korean adoptees negotiate others' racialized expectations of them and the effect these expectations have on their identity development and relationships with other Asian Americans provide important insights into how race continues to operate and influence life in American society.

Korean adoptees are also a compelling case for exploring the relative significance of race precisely because their adoption into white American families suggests that barriers between racial groups have eroded in recent decades (Simon and Altstein 2000). However, the belief that race has declined in significance (Wilson 1978) is only one of three camps within the research on the post-civil rights significance of race. A second camp counters that racial prejudices have declined more in public culture than in private expression or social consequence (Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1997; Bonilla-Silva 2003; Sears, Sidanius, and Bobo 2000), and a third camp argues that the significance of race is shifting from the white-nonwhite boundary to the nonblack-black boundary (Bobo and Zubrinsky 1996; Yancey 2003). Less optimistically, the second camp would be suspicious of the color-blindness imputed to white adoptive parents and the actual experiences of Korean adoptees themselves, whereas the third camp would accept the declining significance of race for the white-Asian boundary but be suspicious of its implications for other intergroup boundaries. Still others would argue that the three major camps are too narrowly focused on domestic race relations and therefore miss the importance of the transnational context for how Americans, particularly white Americans, perceive and treat Asian Americans. Rather than simply regarding Asian Americans with more tolerance than they do African Americans, whites also perceive Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners—forever tied to their ancestral homelands and colored by the homeland's relation to the United States as threat, ally, or dependent (C. Kim 1999; N. Kim 2007b). These researchers would suspect that Korean adoption represents neither the color-blind acceptance of Asian Americans nor an emerging solidarity against blacks, but instead the invisibility of their specific racial experiences to whites. In sum, the experiences of Korean adoptees have important implications for ongoing debates about the character and scope of recent changes in racial attitudes and racial inequality. Therefore, we ask: What is "the Korean adoptee experience"? And what does it suggest about the state of race relations in contemporary America?

We argue that the experience of Korean adoptees indicates that far from simply declining or rising in significance, race has become increasingly contradic-

tory in how it shapes the lives of Americans. Despite being raised in racially integrated families, Korean adoptees have racial experiences that contradict their apparently color-blind upbringing. Although the result is a nearly universal interest in exploring their ethnicity, we find no single path for ethnic exploration but instead a wide range of individual strategies for exploring and asserting their social citizenship—that is, their sense of belonging in a hegemonically white nation. What most of their strategies share, however, is the achievement of an exemption from the persistent association of authentic Americanness with whiteness. The fact that Asian adoptees are able to achieve—but also must regularly achieve—honorary whiteness in their everyday lives illustrates a critical aspect of the state of race relations in the contemporary United States. In brief, racial hierarchy persists into the present in the very ways in which whites accept nonwhites into their social networks, neighborhoods, and even families: primarily as individuals shorn of their groups, that is, as exceptions to unchallenged attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs about their race or ethnic ancestry.

RESEARCH ON KOREAN ADOPTION

Until recently, there has been a general lack of research on Korean-white placements and their impact on the lives of adoptees and their families and on the implications of the phenomenon for broader race relations. Early studies assessed adoptee social adjustment (DiVirgilio 1956; Child Welfare League of America 1960; Valk 1957), but more extensive research was not conducted until the mid-1970s, nearly twenty-five years into the practice (D. S. Kim 1977). Other studies followed, with the majority coming from scholars in psychology, social work, and, to a lesser degree, sociology. To be sure, Korean adoption research benefited from the added attention paid to transracial adoption when controversy erupted in the 1970s over placements of African American children with white parents (Lee 2003a). With critics charging that transracial placements ultimately did more harm than good for adoptees and supporters denying such claims, Korean adoption, with its long-standing placement history, came under increasing interest and inspection (Simon and Altstein 1977; Feigelman and Silverman 1983; Benson et al. 1994).

Borrowing from Richard Lee's (2003a) fine review of the transracial adoption field, we have grouped the available social science research on Korean adoption into three, non-exclusive categories:

1. *Outcome* studies, including physical, linguistic, cognitive, psychological, and social adjustment: Andresen (1992), Brooks and Barth (1999), Cederblad

- (1982), Cederblad et al. (1999), Clark and Hanisee (1982), Feigelman and Silverman (1983), Hoksbergen (1991), S. P. Kim, Hong, and Kim (1979) Simon and Altstein (1977, 1992, 2000), Tizard (1991), and Winick, Meyer, and Harris (1975).
2. *Identity development (racial, ethnic, cultural)* studies: Baden (2002), Baden and Steward (2000), Brooks and Barth (1999), Friedlander (1999), Friedlander et al. (2000), Grotevant et al. (2000), Hollingsworth (1997), Huh (2007), Huh and Reid (2000), Koh (1993), Meier (1999), and Westhues and Cohen (1998).
 3. *Cultural socialization* studies: Carstens and Julia (2000), Friedlander et al. (2000), Johnston et al. (2007), Kallgren and Caudill (1993), E. Kim (2007), Kim Park (2007), Lee and Quintana (2005), Vonk et al. (2007), and Yoon (2004).

Korean adoption research is dominated by outcome studies, which assess the psychological, behavioral, and developmental consequences of placing children with parents who are of a different race and culture. For the most part, this research has shown that Korean adoptees raised in white families thrive and do not differ significantly from same-race adopted children or non-adopted children once other factors are taken into consideration (see especially Benson et al. 1994; Simon and Altstein 1977, 2000; Feigelman and Silverman 1983). Significant mitigating factors include age at adoption, gender, adoptive family structure, and pre-adoption history (Benson et al. 1994; Bimmel et al. 2003; Brooks and Barth 1999; Cederblad 1982; Cederblad et al. 1999; Friedlander 1999; D. S. Kim 1977; Verhulst, Althaus, and Versluis-den Bieman 1990a, 1990b). In general, adoptees appear to be well adjusted, to perform well in school, and to be free of growth or developmental problems.

Differences emerged, however, in the areas of racial identification and exposure to, and comfort interacting with, same-race peers. Some studies found that Korean adoptees were less comfortable identifying as Korean as opposed to American or white, had few opportunities to interact with other Koreans or Asian Americans, and experienced discomfort over both their physical appearance and their interactions with other Asians (Brooks and Barth 1999; Feigelman and Silverman 1983; D. S. Kim 1978; Meier 1999). In the comparative study conducted by Peter Benson and his colleagues (1994) of 715 adoptive families, both same-race and transracial, the authors found that Asian adoptees, the majority of whom were Korean, were the least likely

of various transracial adoptees to say that they felt “really proud” of their racial background. Furthermore, in response to the question “Which has made growing up difficult for you: your race, being adopted, both, or neither?” one out of three Asian adoptees (35 percent) said that their race had made growing up difficult. Although it is important not to overstate these findings, they do suggest that a substantial minority of Korean adoptees have some difficulty relating to their racial and ethnic identities.

Identity development studies are a more recent addition to Korean adoption research. Although outcome research also explores identity issues, the approach is typically limited to asking questions that assess adoptee accuracy in self-identification, willingness to identify racially and ethnically, and association of attributes to racial background. In contrast, research on identity development is more deeply concerned with how adoptees relate to their racial and ethnic identities and whether having a sense of racial-ethnic pride aids them in coping with racial prejudice and discrimination. These studies recognize that identity formation is a complex process for all adoptees (Hoopes 1990; Grotevant et al. 2000), but that, for transracial adoptees, both domestic and international, the challenges are further compounded by differences of race and culture (Friedlander 1999).

The research of Amanda Baden and Robbie Steward (Baden 2002; Baden and Steward 2000), in particular, captures the nuanced ways in which transracial adoptees can identify racially and ethnically. Their cultural-racial identity model emphasizes the need to acknowledge the diversity among transracial adoptees in how they relate to both their own racial and ethnic origins and their parents’ racial and cultural backgrounds. One adoptee may identify strongly with her mother’s Norwegian culture, but also acknowledge the significance of being Asian in the predominantly white community where she lives. Another adoptee may dismiss her own racial and cultural background altogether and simply identify as white, both racially and culturally, in solidarity with her adoptive family. Baden and Steward’s model allows for sixteen possible combinations, each representing a distinct “face” of transracial adoption with a unique set of experiences and related issues” (Baden and Steward 2000, 18).

Overall, research has found that Korean adoptees do not strongly identify in ethnic terms. Dong Soo Kim’s (1977, 1978) study of 406 Korean adolescents captures the prevailing theme in this body of research. Most of these adoptees had “little Korean identity” and preferred to think of themselves as American or, in some cases, as Korean American. Since few adoptees have

opportunities to interact with individuals from their native country on a consistent or meaningful basis, it is not surprising that they have little sense of what it means to be Korean (Friedlander 1999). Lacking a positive reference group to identify with, most adoptees are left to form their own conception of Korean people based largely on media images and stereotypes, images that often gloss over ethnic-specific differences in favor of a generic Asian stereotype. In the absence of something meaningful and positive to associate with, adoptees are more likely to opt out of identifying as Korean.

It is important to note, however, that adoptees' relationship to their identities does vary based on the historical period when they came of age and that it can change over the life course and in response to new opportunities and institutional contexts (Shiao and Tuan 2008b). Going to college, moving to a community with larger numbers of Koreans or Asian Americans, traveling abroad, and having children are just a few of the milestones that can have an impact on adoptee access to, and familiarity with, Korean culture and peers, as well as on adoptees' willingness to explore or claim an ethnic identity.

Finally, cultural socialization studies address how Korean adoptees learn about race and culture, both within and outside their white families. Particular emphasis has been placed on the role of white parents in creating a racially aware family setting and providing their children with opportunities to explore their racial and ethnic backgrounds. According to Richard Lee (2003a, 719), "An underlying assumption of [this] research is that healthy psychological development is contingent on positive racial and ethnic experiences." Similarly, Carl Kallgren and Pamela Caudill (1993) argue that a family's "racial stance" can strongly influence whether adoptees develop healthy relationships to their racial identity. Families who are "racially dissonant" and express ambivalent or openly negative attitudes toward acknowledging racial differences may inadvertently contribute to adoptees' development of a poor self-image.

Beyond the family, Eleana Kim (2007) has conducted fascinating research on "motherland" tours and attempts on the part of the South Korean government to "grant Koreanness" to overseas Korean adoptees visiting the country of their birth. Responding to the negative press that the country received during the 1988 Olympic Games—which highlighted the international exportation of "its greatest natural resource"—the government sought through its Overseas Korean Foundation to reconnect with its former citizens by offering cultural enrichment opportunities, including "trips to ancient palaces and courses on Korean 'traditional' food and customs" (E. Kim 2007, 57). While simultaneously a good-faith effort and a public relations spectacle, Kim argues that these trips amounted

“to little more than a quick and dirty introduction to Korea’s ‘rich culture’ that feels contrived and forced (53).” Rather than encourage cultural pride and a greater sense of connection to the country, these official efforts often left adoptees feeling alienated, ethnically inauthentic, and even resistant. In contrast, Kim argues, some U.S.-based community-building efforts—such as “The Gathering,” a Korean adoptee-centered conference that took place in 1999 in Washington, D.C.—provide a more meaningful socialization experience for adoptees. At the “Gathering” conference, for instance, emphasis was less on Korea and Korean culture and more on the emergence of a Korean adoptee identity and subculture (Freundlich and Lieberthal 2000).

Identity development and socialization studies stand apart from earlier outcome studies in several important ways. First, early outcome studies generally assumed the goal of assimilation into the adoptive family as well as American society. That adoptees might benefit from maintaining a bicultural perspective or that the family’s overall identity or cultural orientation might change was generally not considered. Instead, the onus for change rested squarely on the child’s shoulders. As Toby Alice Volkman (2005, 85) has noted:

When Oregonians Harry and Bertha Holt launched adoption from South Korea as a Christian “rescue” mission for mixed-race orphans fathered by American soldiers, it seems that little thought was given to how such children would fit into a society where sameness was the unquestioned norm. The prevailing “clean break” model of domestic adoption was transposed, in intercountry adoption, into a “clean break” from biological progenitors and from the national or cultural origins of the child.

Early research did not question whether a “clean break” was truly in the best interests of adoptees. It is only with more recent work that such assumptions have been challenged by parents, adoption professionals, and scholars. Recent research on Chinese adoption, in particular, reflects this paradigmatic shift (Dorow 2002, 2003, 2006a, 2006b; Johnston et al. 2007; Tessler, Gamache, and Liu 1999; Volkman 2003).

OUR APPROACH AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Our own work spans the categories of identity development and cultural socialization research and reflects our sociological training, particularly in the areas of ethnicity, identity, and the Asian American experience. Sociology problematizes the concept of an essentialist identity—a consciousness natural,

primordial, or necessary for members of a group (Espiritu 1992; King and DaCosta 1996; Nagel 1994). Instead of static inheritances from family and kin, racial and ethnic identities are understood as active and ongoing processes whose meanings can change over the life course and in response to emerging opportunities and contexts (Gans 1979; Song 2003; Tuan 1998). Emphasis is placed on (1) how the very categories available for identification are historically dynamic (Omi and Winant 1994); (2) how groups reconstruct collective identities in nontraditional forms (Jeung 2002, 2004; Kibria 2000; Nagel 1994, 1996; Song 2003; Tuan 1998; Vo 1996); (3) how individuals negotiate their identity in relation to broader stereotypes, discourses, and collective identities (Frankenberg 1993; Lee 1996; Spickard and Burroughs 2000; Waters 1999); and (4) how individual identities develop in interactions with coethnics and racial others (Nagel 1996).

Thus, whether Korean adoptees develop identities as Americans, whites, Koreans, Asians, or Asian Americans becomes an issue of broader social and political conditions, personal relations, and stage of life rather than psychological health. Rather than focusing on the relative identification with a taken-for-granted category or participation in a distant foreign culture, the sociological perspective emphasizes how these and other categories and social practices are chosen, discarded, or revised over time and looks at the factors triggering these shifts. These areas of research point to new ways of thinking about Asian adoption and the broader contexts in which adoptees and their families encounter consequential racial-ethnic constructs.

To further highlight how our approach differs from earlier research, we return to Caleb Littell, the adoptee with whom we opened this chapter. First, existing research relies heavily on the perspective of adoptive parents rather than that of adoptees and focuses largely on family social adjustment (Hollingsworth 1997; D. S. Kim 1978). In Caleb's case, his parents could have reported, in good faith, that their child had adjusted well to their family (especially at earlier stages in his life), and still miss the depth of his racial and ethnic identity struggles. Second, the literature has not been consistent in exploring the distinct yet related contributions of family and extrafamilial influences (such as peers, strangers, the neighborhood, the community, institutions) in shaping adoptee identity. As Caleb's story indicates, what happens outside the home is just as important as what happens within it. Third, existing studies typically use survey data that are not designed to speak to an adoptee's qualitative relationship with his or her ethnic identity and changes over the life course. Caleb, for instance, actively

rejected being Korean and Asian early on, but today is gradually experiencing a change of heart as he matures and gains more perspective on his experiences. Lastly, the available research sheds little light on what is unique, if anything, about the identity formations or coping strategies of Asian adoptees like Caleb compared to Asian Americans more broadly.

We designed our study of Asian adoption with these considerations in mind. First, we directly focus on adult adoptees rather than on adoptive parent evaluations of their children. Moreover, we interviewed adults who were in a position to reflect on the development of their ethnic identities and racial experiences not only within their families but also in broader social contexts. Second, we examine adoptees' experiences not only in their adoptive families but also with extrafamilial institutions and influences. Other environmental factors include those chosen in adulthood, such as organizational affiliations, leisure activities, career and employment contexts, political participation, and experiences with racism and discrimination (Frankenberg 1993; Meier 1999; Nagel 1996; Waters 1990, 1999).

Third, we concentrate on the understudied population of Korean adoptees who make up the largest proportion of international adoptions in the last half-century, as well as the largest proportion of transracial adoptions. Fourth, we empirically compare identity formation in Korean adoptees with identity formation in Asian Americans raised by their biological parents, but under similar geographic and historical circumstances. And finally, we capitalize on the fact that multiple generations of adopted Korean children have come of age since they first began migrating to the United States in the 1950s. Included in our study are members of the "pioneer" cohort, the first generation of adoptees to join their American families, as well as those who came decades later and during different historical moments in U.S. race relations.

The Asian Immigrants in White Families Project

Data for this book come from our Asian Immigrants in White Families Project, funded by the Russell Sage Foundation. The study consists of life-history interviews with sixty-one adult Korean adoptees recruited from a gender-stratified random sample of international adoption placement records. We restricted the range of placement years in order to interview adoptees who were twenty-five years of age or older at the time of the interview in 2000 and who could thus reflect with sufficient distance on their childhood and its salience for their adult lives. Our sampling frame is one agency's 3,255 placements of Korean

children with families living in the West Coast states of California, Oregon, and Washington between the years 1950 and 1975. In sum, our study is the first to collect in-depth interviews from a random sample of adult Korean adoptees.

We examine the experiences of Korean adoptees at four moments in identity development: (1) early childhood, (2) young adulthood, (3) current practices and lifestyles, and (4) reflections on societal perceptions. Our interview questionnaire is divided into four sections corresponding with these four moments of identity formation. Furthermore, some sections include different but parallel questions to explore internal differences based on gender, urban or rural experience, and generational cohorts. We designed the questionnaire around a narrative comparison of past and present experiences and beliefs. Each section asks questions related to significant factors identified in the sociological and popular literature on Americans' experience of diversity.

In section 1 of the questionnaire, on *childhood experiences*, we probe for retrospective data and reflections on adoptees' lives up through high school. This section establishes important facts about the social milieu and family members shaping adoptees' pre-adult experiences. We explore extrafamilial experiences and inquire about the places they lived, the schools they attended, their contacts with others "like" themselves, and their consciousness of being Asian and adopted. We also explore familial experiences and ask the interviewees about how their parents (and other kin) influenced their attitudes about and involvement in ethnic culture and prepared them to deal with discrimination. Lastly, we ask adoptees about the circumstances of their adoption; the social characteristics defining their adoptive families; their earliest memories, both abroad (if any) and in the United States; and how their parents included their adoption in the "family story." This section addresses the sociological literature on (1) the influence of childhood neighborhoods, ethnic places, region, gender, and local demographics on early experiences with racial others; (2) the role of family in shaping cultural transmission and responses to racism; and (3) the role of family in reconstructing family narratives to include adoption and international migration.

Section 2 covers the *early adulthood years*. Here we probe for information and reflections on adoptees' lives after high school, asking distinct but comparable questions of college-goers and non-college-goers. As in the previous section, section 2 retrospectively identifies important facts about adoptees' initial years of independence from their families. We ask college-goers about the racial-ethnic demographics of their institution and their friends in college

and the role that college played in their postsecondary identity development. We ask non-college-goers about the racial-ethnic demographics of their postsecondary friends and the relative opportunities they had to explore their racial-ethnic identities. This section addresses the sociological literature on the relative importance of new social contexts in significantly channeling adult perspectives on race and ethnicity.

Section 3 gives us a look at *later adulthood*. This section explores the scope and meaning of ethnic-racial practices in adoptees' mature lifestyles and the role of race and ethnicity in their romantic involvements. First we ask about the racial-ethnic demographics of their workplace and their closest current friends and how regularly they explore their ethnicity-race by means of personal associations, ethnic foods, ethnic holidays, linguistic practice, domestic or foreign travel, and organizational participation. Next we ask distinct but comparable questions of respondents who are in either interethnic or intraethnic romantic relationships. With intraethnically partnered interviewees, we explore the formation of the relationship, the influence of ethnicity on their lives together, its role in their child-rearing practices and beliefs, and whether and how they have prepared their children to respond to discrimination. We ask interethnically partnered respondents the same questions, but preface them by asking how "difference" has played a role in the relationship, how their respective families have reacted, and how familiar their respective families are with interethnic relationships. This section addresses the sociological literature on the relative decline and renewal of ethnic practices across a variety of dimensions: food and holidays, romantic relationships, and ethnic organizations.

In the final section, on *personal identity and societal perceptions*, we probe the public-private interface of adoptees' racial-ethnic identities. We ask what meaning their self-identification has for them, which social interactions make race and ethnicity more salient for them, and how, and their opinions about discrimination against Asians in the United States. Section 4 addresses the sociological literature on the public-private juncture that has distinguished the "ethnic options" of white Americans (Waters 1990) and Asian Americans (Tuan 1998).

Holt International Children Services provided access to its placement records through procedures that protected the confidentiality of adoptees and their families. We invited equally sized samples of men and women to participate until we reached a total sample size of sixty-one adoptees. The complex recruitment process began with the agency sending letters to the adoptive parents for randomly selected placements at their last known mailing address, which

was typically from when the adoptee had reached eighteen years of age. The letters asked parents to forward the invitation materials to their adult children, who in turn were asked to mail or fax their consent forms to us, the principal investigators.

Out of the original sixty-one adoptees we interviewed, we eventually disqualified two respondents for geographic reasons. Two additional respondents required special consideration. Matt Riley was born with developmental disabilities and still lives with his parents; we include his data in chapters addressing adolescence but decided to exclude his experiences from analyses involving adulthood. Another respondent, Ella Scott, has racially mixed parents: her adoptive mother is Korean, and her adoptive father is white. After much debate, we decided to keep Ella's data in the sample but to note her unique circumstances where appropriate.

The final sample consists of thirty-nine women and twenty men (nineteen when Matt's data are not included), approximately the same proportions as in the target population despite their equal stratification during recruitment. The age distribution ranges from twenty-five to fifty-one, with a mean of 35.9 years; age at adoption ranges from two months to thirteen years, including 46 percent who were one year or younger at arrival and 29 percent who were three years or older.² Also included in the sample are twelve biracial adoptees, all of Korean and white American ancestry. Biracial adoptees lend a methodological twist to our study design, since their identity development may differ from that of monoracial adoptees. As Leslie Doty Hollingsworth (1997) has noted, there is a dearth of research on mixed-race adoptees and how their experiences converge or diverge from those of monoracial adoptees. Where relevant, we spotlight this subpopulation with an eye toward highlighting their unique experiences.

We also interviewed a smaller sample of Asian Americans who are not adoptees. Existing transracial adoption research frequently compares transracial adoptees with white adoptees or the biological children of white adoptive families. Although these studies are useful for capturing the special dynamics within adoptive families, they are less useful for determining how the experiences of transracial adoptees compare with those of their non-adopted counterparts, particularly on issues of racial and ethnic identity development. To pursue these issues, we decided to compare Korean adoptees with same-ethnicity as well as same-race non-adopted Asian Americans who grew up in the same geographic communities as the adoptees in the study, or in similar ones. Where appropriate, we replace questions having to do specifically with adoption history with questions that probe their families' immigration histories.

Our initial plan was to interview up to sixty non-adoptees matched with each adoptee on the basis of region *and* gender *and* either ethnicity *or* race. Comparing Korean adoptees with same-ethnicity as well as same-race non-adoptees, we reasoned, would allow us to vary the possible axes of social difference—race, ethnicity, and adoptive status. Locating matched non-adoptees, however, proved to be much more difficult than we imagined. We had hoped that adoptees would refer us to non-adoptees among their friends and acquaintances who grew up in the same communities and attended the same schools as them. As it turned out, many adoptees grew up in communities where they were the only Asian, excluding their adopted siblings. Moreover, we were often unsuccessful in locating the non-adoptees whose names some of the adoptees were able to offer us, despite numerous efforts and strategies to do so.

In the end, we interviewed twenty-nine non-adoptees obtained through adoptee references, snowball sampling, and general word of mouth.³ The sample is exceedingly diverse with respect to ethnic background, migration status, generation, and class background. Suffice to say, the sample is far from ideal and does not allow for a strong test of how adoptees and non-adoptees compare on racial and ethnic identity development. Our original plans to prominently feature this comparison group have fallen by the wayside. Instead, we cautiously include data from these interviews in the interest of identifying fruitful areas for further study rather than drawing any definitive comparisons between adoptees and non-adoptees.

Few studies live up to their authors' initial ambition (fantasy, really), and ours is no exception. The challenge we encountered recruiting a viable non-adoptee sample is just one of several limitations we need to acknowledge up front. Another concerns our response rate: we cannot make a valid estimate of the response rate because an unknown number of envelopes were returned to the agency for incorrect addresses and the agency destroyed them in the interests of confidentiality; however, we can calculate its lower bound to be 16.3 percent. This potentially low rate of response raises the question of sample bias—that is, whether and how our respondents differ from the nonrespondents in ways that limit our analysis of ethnic exploration.⁴ To put this limitation in perspective, however, our sampling procedures remain an improvement on the convenience sampling typically necessary for studying such populations. It is practically a tradition within the sociology of transracial adoption to recruit subjects through adoptive parent organizations (Feigelman 2000; Feigelman and Silverman 1983; Silverman 1980; Simon 1984, 1994; Simon and Altstein 1977, 1987, 1992, 2000; Tessler et al. 1999). This form of sampling increases the

representation of parents who actively identify as transracial adoptive parents, a bias that might bear more directly on the identities of their children. By comparison, our sample is less constrained with respect to our central theoretical and measurement constructs.

Another limitation is that the use of retrospective data typically introduces bias related to memory failure and social desirability. In particular, older subjects may not accurately remember their early and middle twenties. We cannot be sure of the validity of every interview; however, we were able to clarify claims that appeared questionable or vague and correct them if necessary by probing for connections to other self-reported events.

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

In the next two chapters, we explore how adoptees and non-adoptees experienced their childhood and adolescent years. In the first half of chapter 2, we historicize Korean adoption's rise and institutionalization in the United States, paying particular attention to how the practice has been juxtaposed against another form of transracial adoption, black-white adoption. In the second half, we explore why the adoptees' parents chose to adopt Korean children and whether they had ever considered adopting an African American child. In sum, we reveal how the racial history of Korean adoption misled white parents into assuming that race would not matter in the lives of their adopted children.

In chapter 3, we focus on family life and how parents approached the topics of adoption, race, and culture. In particular, we explore the role of the family in setting up the earliest expectations regarding how adoptees *should* respond to being Korean, Asian, and transracially adopted. Although white parents were largely unprepared for the challenges faced by their children, their responses ranged widely, creating significant variation in the lessons that adoptees absorbed about the meaning of family, race, and ethnicity.

In chapters 4 and 5, we shift the focus to adoptees' lives after high school and during their initial years of independence from their families. These chapters address the sociological literature on the relative importance of new social contexts in channeling adult perspectives and opportunities to explore race and ethnicity. Chapter 4 focuses on adoptees' forays into ethnic exploration in early adulthood. We examine whether and how adoptees and non-adoptees explored their ethnic identities during their initial years of independence from their families. We demonstrate that their social environment was a critical influence on the conditions for exploration and the content of exploration experi-

ences. For most adoptees, attending college full-time mattered more for how they explored their ethnicity than whether their parents were open to discussing racial and ethnic issues during childhood.

Chapter 5 follows the life-stage progression by moving to our respondents' ethnic explorations and practices in mature adulthood. We demonstrate that exploration in later adulthood also depended on whether opportunities were available and whether the available activities fit the interests of individual respondents. In addition, we find that of the two major paths for exploration introduced in chapter 4, *exploring their cultural heritage* is what commanded the most interest among adoptees in later adulthood; however, it also resulted in the most frustrating outcomes, whereas *pursuing social exposure*, such as socializing with other Asian Americans, most fulfilled and sustained adoptees' interest in their ethnicity.

Chapter 6 focuses on the state of adoptees' current racial and ethnic identification and the meanings they attach to their chosen identities. In brief, we reveal that the labels with which they choose to identify themselves are less important than the reasoning behind their choices and the shared experiences for which their ethnic identities provide an answer.

In chapter 7, we offer our concluding thoughts about the state of Korean adoption and the implications for broader race relations and social policy.