

Parental Assimilation of Internationally Adopted Children

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Abstract

International adoption has been increasing in the United States since the 1970's (Grotevant, Gunnar, Hellerstedt, Johnson, Lee, & Madsen, 2007). The purpose of this exploratory pilot study was to examine the attitudes of parents who have adopted internationally through a Midwestern adoption agency. The central research question was "What are the attitudes of parents as they assimilate their internationally adopted child?" The researchers predicted that parents would be open to discussing issues that promote positive ethnic identity. It was also hypothesized that adoptive parents would respond positively to receiving useful cultural resources from their adoption agencies. There was a 27% return rate, resulting in nine study participants. Survey data was statistically analyzed using frequencies and mean comparisons. Significance testing as well as reliability were not conducted due to the small sample size. Overall, findings supported the hypotheses; qualitative comments were analyzed. Implications for practitioners include providing access to parents of useful cultural resources. Implications for future research would be to obtain a larger sample.

Introduction

International adoption has been steadily increasing in the United States since the 1970's (Grotevant et al.,

2007). These adoptions involve children who were born in a country other than where the adoptive parents reside or are citizens of a country other than where the adoptive parents live (Adoption.com, 2009). Since the 1990s, there has been a threefold increase in the annual rate of children adopted from abroad, from 7,093 children in 1990 to 22,884 children in 2004 (The Minnesota Adoption Project Team, 2006). Americans adopt children ranging in age from infancy to early adolescence from more than 100 different countries, although the majority of children come from just six countries, including: China, Russia, South Korea, Guatemala, Ukraine, and Romania (Kenney, Kubo, Ishizawa, & Stevens, 2006). As international adoption continues to become an increasingly popular means of forming a family in the United States, societal influences in the current environment will greatly impact how parents choose to nurture their adopted child. The different strategies parents employ while assimilating their child to a new surrounding holds deterministic value to the child's individual development. Assimilation refers to: "the merging of cultural traits from previously distinct cultural groups..." (Random House Dictionary, 2009). Research suggested that parents who were aware of the importance of racial differences in today's society were more likely to have provided cultural opportunities that promoted positive ethnic identity development for their child (Grotevant et al., 2007). Additionally, when resources such as post-adoption services and public support met the needs of parents, the overall well-being of the family increased (Anderson, 2005). Are there enough resources, however, to assure a smooth transition and healthy adaption for parents and their child in the full adoption process? What are the perspectives of parents as they move through the course of accommodating an additional member to the family? To further investigate these questions, the researchers reviewed current literature on international adoption and surveyed attitudes of adoptive parents at one Midwestern adoption

agency as they assimilated their internationally adopted child into the U.S. culture.

Literature Review

A review of the most current literature on international adoption was conducted through the research database service, EBSCOhost. A large focus of the literature was directed towards developmental risks of internationally adopted children such as malnutrition in population-specific regions. One population-based survey of parents who adopted children from countries outside the United States was found. Much of the literature focused on the process of international adoption in China and Africa, two of the most popular regions from which American couples adopt children. Overall, there was a gap in the literature on specific parenting behaviors for internationally adopted children. Besides the recognition of health and medical needs of children, the authors of the studies focused on variables such as cultural socialization, roles of race and ethnicity, and post-adoption services (Grotevant et al., 2007; Ishizawa et al., 2006; Minnesota International Adoption Team, 2006; Anderson, 2005).

Grotevant et al. (2007) conducted the International Adoption Project, the first population-based survey in the United States of parents who adopted children from countries outside the United States. Surveys were mailed to 2,977 parents who finalized their international adoption in Minnesota between the dates of January 1990 and December 1998. A response rate of 62% yielded the following results; 88% of parents who adopted internationally reported transracial adoptions. Emerging trends related to factors such as the age and sex of the adopted child, as well as the income and education levels of the adoptive parents. Findings showed that parents with higher education were more likely to adopt internationally than were parents with a high school diploma. Respondents to the International Adoption Project

survey were overwhelmingly white, college-educated, and financially secure. Because the percentage of adoptions in the U.S. that were international rose dramatically in the last decade, it is important to understand the composition, concerns, and strengths of transracial families that are often created through unique forms of migration.

Ishizawa et al., (2006) analyzed the role of race and ethnicity in constructing American families through intercountry adoption. The findings indicated that minority-race parents were more likely than white parents to adopt a child of the same race as themselves. For example, an Asian-American couple would be more likely to adopt a child from China than they would from Russia. In addition, the probability of white parents adopting a white versus nonwhite child from abroad depended on various factors, such as age, sex, health status of the child, and the presence of other children in the household. Parents' levels of education were also related to whether their adopted child was of the same race or ethnicity as themselves. White American parents with college degrees were more likely to adopt Asian or Hispanic children than were parents with some or no college experience. Overall, the findings of this study showed that American parents who adopt children from abroad are primarily white, well-educated, and middle class.

The Minnesota International Adoption Team (2006) focused their study on the cultural socialization in families with internationally adopted children. Through an analysis of variance of three components, including age, sex, and racial/ethnic status of the child, the following results were discovered: parents with lower color-blind racial attitudes were more likely to have their children participate in cultural activities, to participate in post-adoption support groups themselves, to speak with their children by talking to them about racism and discrimination in school, and were more likely to speak with teachers about their children's adoptive history. Parents engaging in these initiatives and utilizing

these resources also held stronger beliefs in the value and significance of enculturalization and racialization. Because most adoption agencies do not mandate pre- and post-adoption services and emphasize resources for adopted children more than adoptive parents, this study helps to inform clinical practice and adoption policy.

Anderson (2005) focused her study on post-adoption services to families who have adopted children that are considered high risk, which includes the child being over the age of three, multiple sibling groups, transracial adoptions, children diagnosed with special learning, mental health, emotional or medical/physical need and/or multiple foster placements. The study was intended to describe parents' demographic characteristics, as well as assess the different perceptions and experiences of post-adoption services between mothers and fathers. Anderson used an assessment tool developed by the Pennsylvania Adoption Connections Program staff to evaluate 182 participants currently using post-adoption services. Results showed that all adoptive families, regardless of how long ago the adoption occurred, acknowledged similar needs of services and support. Evidence pointed out that meeting the adopted child's special needs increased the child's overall well-being and therefore increased parent-child attachment, decreasing the chance of disruption. Because there were no significant differences found between the responses of mothers and fathers, this study indicated that previous studies focusing only on mothers experiences could also be applied to fathers as well.

Parents who use post-adoption services and integrate the child's native culture into the child's upbringing are preparing their children for a world of diversity where it is important to develop a strong sense of ethnic identity and cultural competence. Studies have shown that internationally adopted children, as well as their parents, benefit from the use of post-adoption services, The question left to ponder is,

do children and parents feel they are getting enough? What current research fails to provide is the parents' viewpoints on whether or not they are receiving the needed services to the extent that they wish to receive them. The current study is going to address this question by observing the attitudes and concerns of parents with internationally adopted children. When the study is complete, our findings will be able to provide agencies that offer post-adoption services information on how they could improve their services and better meet the needs of their clients.

Theoretical Framework

This study applied the Family Ecological Theory framework (Strong, DeVault, & Cohen, 2005; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The Family Ecological Theory assumes the environment plays a major role and heavily influences families. A family will be impacted by many outside sources in the environment and will try to adapt to their surroundings. Four different levels of environmental contexts reflect multiple environments that families are influenced by. These four levels consist of the microsystem: immediate environment; the mesosystem: the connection between the microsystems; the exosystem: the environment that affects the individual indirectly; and the macrosystem: the wider society that impacts the behavior settings in which a family functions on a daily basis.

The application of the Family Ecological Theory to this study would foresee the difference in the range of attitudes in parents as they attempt to assimilate their internationally adopted child into a new surrounding culture. The different approaches parents take in accommodating their child or children will affect their individual development in the United States. The Family Ecological Theory would help to explain the varying attitudes of parents and the steps they take in orienting their child in new surroundings. Another prediction according to this theory would include the larger

macrosystem and how it influences the feelings parents have towards the process of nurturing the unique cultural needs of their child. Along with this prediction, the levels of cultural sensitivity in society at large would have an impact on the future of internationally adopted children's reality.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was threefold: (1) to examine the attitudes of parents who have adopted internationally through a Midwestern adoption agency, (2) to develop a reliable survey instrument to measure the effectiveness of services and programs that have assisted in the process of assimilation, and, (3) to provide data to help support the already established adoption resources made available through various agencies. The authors found a similar study that examined the effectiveness of post-adoption services to families who have adopted children that are considered high risk, which includes transracial adoptions (Anderson, 2005). The Minnesota Adoption Team (2006) reported that parents who utilized resources from adoption agencies held stronger beliefs in the value and significance of enculturation and racialization.

The central research question in this study was "What are the attitudes of parents as they assimilate their internationally adopted child into U.S. culture?" The authors predicted that parents who were more open to discussing issues that promote positive ethnic identity would be more likely to participate in post-adoption services and resources. It was hypothesized that adoptive parents will report having an overall higher sense of family well-being as the process of assimilation occurs. As for the adoptive parents that have not participated in post-adoption services, their children may experience feelings surrounding the loss of birth culture, family history, and coping mechanisms of how to face racism and discrimination in their daily lives (The Minnesota Adoption Team, 2006). The authors' hypothesis

was informed by the literature that was reviewed which consistently reported a relationship between post-adoption services and family well-being. This hypothesis is also supported by the Family Ecology Theory that observes a relationship between a child's development and the context of their environment.

Method

Participants

The site of data collection for this study was a Midwestern adoption agency. The participants were nine parents that have previously adopted internationally. Of these nine, three of the participants were male and six were female. There were two participants between the ages of 30-41, six between the ages of 42-53, and the remaining participant was between the ages of 54-65. There were eight parents of White/Caucasian ethnicity, and one of Canadian ethnicity. Two children were adopted from Mongolia, two from China, three from the Philippines, and two from Russia. There were two children of Mongolian ethnicity, two of Chinese ethnicity, two of Filipino ethnicity, one of Asian ethnicity, one of White ethnicity, and one of Russian/Tartar ethnicity.

Research Design

The purpose of this survey research was to collect findings of a small population-based sample and project these findings onto a similar, larger population so that some implications could be made about attitudes, behaviors, and characteristics of this population (Babbie, 1990). Current attitudes from our sample population were identified to generalize about a larger population of similar parents who have adopted internationally. The survey design type is best described as a cross-sectional study design in that it was used to capture knowledge about attitudes from a cross section of the population at one point in time. The researchers administered online questionnaires through Qualtrics to the

participants. The rationale for using this method was that it was the most effective method to gather data from our study sample due to the off campus location. This method was most convenient because of the fast pace of our research course, low cost, and the quick return of data. The population was families who have adopted a child internationally; the sample was parents that have adopted internationally through a specific Midwestern adoption agency. The study used a non-random purposive sample design, because the purpose was to collect information from parents who have previously adopted a child internationally. Randomization was not used in order to be able to fulfill the sample number in a limited time period. The ethical protection of human subjects was provided by completing the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (IRB) training; this study has been approved by the IRB.

Data Collection Instrument

In order to address the attitudes of parents regarding assimilation of their internationally adopted child, a survey was designed through Qualtrics online survey software. The survey included an email invitation with an implied consent which included a description of the study, definition of any terms not commonly known, risks and benefits, time commitment, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and contact information of the research team and the supervisor as well as instructions for completing the survey.

The survey consisted of five demographic questions relating to gender, age, race, and adopted child's country of origin and racial background. Participants were then given ten closed-ended statements based on a 5-point Likert scale which measured the intensity of the respondents' attitudes ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). Two open-ended questions were provided at the end of the survey. The researchers analyzed this qualitative data through attempting to identify any patterns or themes that

emerged from the participants themselves (McIntyre, 2005). Participants were able to record recommendations for their adoption agency and any other pertinent information that they wanted to include. Questions were informed by literature and theory regarding what factors related to attitudes concerning assimilation of their internationally adopted child.

The survey instrument has both face validity and content validity. Face validity refers to the instrument questions having a logical connection to the concept and research question. Because the questions and concepts addressed in the survey are literature-inspired, it was determined that they are clearly connected to the larger problem of difficulties with assimilation to a new culture. Content validity refers to the instrument statements' coverage of the full range of concepts under the larger topic. The questions addressed a broad range of issues regarding parental attitudes towards assimilation of their internationally adopted child. To increase validity, the survey was piloted to four sets of parents. Feedback indicated that the survey was clear and ready for distribution.

Procedure

To collect the data for this study, parents were sent a link via email enabling them to take the survey anytime between November 4, 2009 and November 17, 2009. The purposive sampling design led the researchers to this specific Midwestern agency where international adoption takes place. Parents were sent an email that included an invitation letter, an attached informed consent, and a URL address that took them directly to the survey. Participants were able to take the survey from the comfort of their own home or in a place of their choice where Internet access was available. Before beginning the survey, participants were provided with a screen giving them the option to continue on with the survey or exit out of the screen if they did not want to participate. Randomization was not used in order to obtain the sample

number targeted given the limited time to collect data. The implied consent was presented for participants to read online before they engaged in the survey. In order to maintain the strict confidentiality, no identifying characteristics were made available to the researchers. After participants read the informed consent, they were then able to take the survey. When all surveys were completed, the findings of the survey were made available to the researchers via an online secured survey instrument. In order to assure confidentiality and to reduce any potential pressure of participants, the agency was not able to access participants' answers. When the surveys were collected electronically, they were secured by the online survey instrument, Qualtrics, and could only be accessed by the researchers through a user name and password.

Data Analysis Plan

The data was first cleaned and checked for any missing data. The cleaned surveys were then coded using acronyms for each variable. Acronyms were ascribed by using the first letter of the first word of each variable. The following two letters of the associated acronyms were randomly chosen within the variable. The first five questions on the survey were demographic variables, including: gender, age, race, and adopted child's country of origin and racial background. Each survey statement was a dependent variable and given an acronym name: To determine if parents participated in at least one cultural event in the past year (*CPT*), if parents participated in post-adoption support groups (*SIV*), the degree to which parents felt confident in talking with their child about potential discrimination (*CMD*), the degree to which parents felt confident in teaching their child appropriate ways to cope with discrimination if it occurred (*COM*), if the internationally adopted child was educated on cultural norms of his/her country of origin (*CNS*), if parents felt association with social norms of U.S. culture was important for their child (*SON*), if parents integrated

their child's culture of origin into their daily lives (CIN), if parents felt sharing the adoptive history of their child with his/her teacher was important (TIV), if parents felt sharing the adoptive history of their child with his/her classmates was important (CII), and if parents received useful cultural resources from their adoption agency (SSF).

To analyze the data, the computer program called *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)*, was used. Each participant was used as the level of analysis. Given that our study was descriptive, data analysis included: frequencies and mean comparisons. Significance testing as well as reliability was not performed due to the small and nonrandom pilot study sample.

Results

The researchers utilized the computer program *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)* to analyze the data that was collected. The statistical analyses that variables were subjected to included: frequency distribution and a reliability analysis.

Surveys were distributed on-line to 30 adoptive parents. Twenty seven percent of these parents responded. All variables were subjected to frequency distribution analysis. Results indicated that there was no missing data. For variables (*CPT*) and (*SIV*), the majority of respondents agreed and/or strongly agreed that they had participated in at least one cultural event in the past year as well as post-adoption support groups that had helped them in the parenting of their internationally adopted child. For the variables (*CMD*) and (*COM*), the majority of respondents stated that they felt confident with talking to their child about potential discrimination and teaching him or her appropriate ways of coping with this discrimination if it occurred. For the variables (*CNS*) and (*SON*), the respondents agreed that not only was their child educated on the cultural norms of their country or origin, but also felt that it was important for their child to

be associated with the social norms of current U.S. culture. For the variable (CIN), the majority of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they had integrated their child’s country and culture of origin into their daily lives. For variable (TIV), the majority of participants agreed that it would be important to share their child’s adoptive history with his or her teacher. For variable (CII), the majority of participants were undecided or disagreed as to whether they felt it was important to share their child’s adoptive history with his or her classmates. The researchers discussed possibilities as to why participants were undecided. One possibility is that parents may be sensitive to their child being recognized as different from their peers. For variable (SSF), results ranged from “agree” to “disagree,” with the majority of participants disagreeing that they had received useful cultural resources from their adoption agencies to help facilitate their child’s connection to his/her culture of origin (refer to Table 1 for Frequency Distribution Analysis and Table 2 for Mean Comparisons).

Table 1
Frequency Distribution

	SD	D	U	A	SA	Total
CPT	11.0%	0.0%	11.0%	44.0%	33.0%	100.0%
SIV	11.0%	11.0%	0.0%	67.0%	11.0%	100.0%
CMD	0.0%	0.0%	22.0%	56.0%	22.0%	100.0%
COM	0.0%	0.0%	11.0%	67.0%	22.0%	100.0%
CNS	0.0%	0.0%	33.0%	67.0%	0.0%	100.0%
SON	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	89.0%	11.0%	100.0%
CIN	0.0%	22.0%	11.0%	56.0%	11.0%	100.0%
TIV	11.0%	11.0%	11.0%	56.0%	11.0%	100.0%
CII	11.0%	33.0%	33.0%	22.0%	0.0%	100.0%
SSF	0.0%	56.0%	11.0%	33.0%	0.0%	100.0%

Note. (CPT)=Participation in at least one cultural event in past year; (SIV)=Participation in post-adoption support groups; (CMD)=Confidence in talking about potential discrimination; (COM)=Confidence in teaching coping methods for potential discrimination; (CNS)=Education surrounding cultural norms; (SON)=Importance of association with U.S. culture; (CIN)=Integration of child’s culture; (TIV)=Importance of sharing adoptive history with teacher; (CII)=Importance of sharing adoptive history with classmates; (SSF)=Received useful resources from agency.

Table 2
Compare Means

	CPT	SIV	CMD	COM	CNS	SON	CIN	TIV	CII	SSF
Mean:	3.89	3.56	4.00	4.11	3.67	4.11	3.56	3.44	2.67	2.78
SD:	1.27	1.24	0.71	0.60	0.50	0.33	1.01	1.24	1.00	0.97
Range:	4.00	4.00	2.00	2.00	1.00	1.00	3.00	4.00	3.00	2.00

Note. (CPT)=Participation in at least one cultural event in past year; (SIV)=Participation in post-adoption support groups; (CMD)=Confidence in talking about potential discrimination; (COM)=Confidence in teaching coping methods for potential discrimination; (CNS)=Education surrounding cultural norms; (SON)=Importance of association with U.S. culture; (CIN)=Integration of child's culture; (TIV)=Importance of sharing adoptive history with teacher; (CII)=Importance of sharing adoptive history with classmates; (SSF)=Received useful resources from agency.

Qualitative comments were received at the end of a number of our surveys. These comments will be analyzed and themes determined in the Discussion section.

Discussion

Overall, results supported the hypothesis that adoptive parents would respond positively to receiving useful cultural resources from their adoption agencies. These findings were supported in the literature (Grotevant et al., 2007; Ishizawa et al., 2006; The Minnesota International Adoption Team, 2006; Anderson, 2005; Strong et al., 2005). Each dependent variable will be discussed in terms of how the results were supported in the literature and /or through the theoretical framework. Thereafter, limitations to the study, implications for practitioners, implications for future research, and concluding remarks will be discussed.

Interestingly, results showed that some respondents disagreed that they had integrated their child's country and culture of origin into their daily lives, regardless of how important they felt educating their child on the cultural norms of their country of origin was. According to Grotevant, et al. some adoptive parents may not even find it necessary to teach their child values and beliefs of his or her birth culture (2007). A majority of respondents in our study agreed, however, that their child had participated in at least one cultural event in the past year in support of the literature which stated that

parents with children who are considered racial and ethnic minorities in the United States are more likely to engage in cultural socialization practices (The Minnesota International Adoption Team, 2006). There seemed to be a considerable amount of agreement among parents who had participated in post-adoption support groups who felt that their parenting had been empowered by the assistance these groups provided. The Minnesota International Adoption Team states, however, that parents who engage in cultural socialization behaviors were actually less likely to have participated in post-adoption support groups (2006). The next two survey statements were regarding parents' degrees of confidence that they were able to confront the topic of discrimination with their child and, henceforth, teach them appropriate coping methods if they granted it necessary. The majority of parents agreed to both statements, indicating that they felt confident in their ability to combat potential racism in a society where racial and ethnic discrimination is persistent, according to Grotevant (2007). Parents overwhelmingly agreed that it is important for their child to be associated with the social norms and standards of current U.S. culture. The Minnesota International Adoption Team found that parents reflect their own cultural biases onto their adopted child, indicating that parents who felt that association with U.S. culture is important, are also the parents who are imposing cultural norms onto their child already (2006). Overall, the researchers found that parents felt that the sharing of their child's adoptive history was more important for the child's teacher than it was for the child's classmates. According to the Minnesota Adoption Team, parents that spoke with teachers about their child's adoption history held stronger beliefs in the value and importance of maintaining ties with their child's country of origin (2006). The concluding survey statement elicited parental response to whether or not parents had received useful cultural resources to facilitate their child's connection to his or her birth culture. According to Anderson, unmet

needs of parents and their adopted child can result in more negative impacts on the overall family well-being (2005). Anderson also states that meeting the adopted child's needs will increase the child's overall well-being and stabilize the bond between parent and child, resulting in decreased likelihood of disturbance through the process of assimilation (2005).

Although most parents agreed that their child was educated on the cultural norms of their country of origin (i.e. language, food, clothing, etc.), there were three respondents who were undecided about this survey statement. The researchers contemplated why some participants would respond in this manner, concluding that some parents may have underestimated their active role in incorporating cultural norms of their child's birth culture. According to the Family Ecological Theory, parents take different approaches in accommodating their child regarding cultural socialization practices, which is why some parents may have responded to the latter survey statement undecidedly (Strong et al., 2005).

The survey included two qualitative, open-ended questions that gave parents the option of including their personal comments. The first question asked parents for recommendations they would give their adoption agency about incorporating aspects of their child's cultural heritage into their daily family life. Of the participants that responded, half responded in a way that pointed out the need for additional resources. Participants requested that their adoption agency should have offered more information to parents about their adopted child's country of origin and ethnic background. One parent pointed out that most of what they had found about their child's birth culture was done on their own and that letting families know what resources are available to them in their communities would be quite helpful. The remaining half of the participants that commented suggested that they would rather take matters into their own hands. The second question asked parents if there was anything else that they

would like the researchers to know regarding their adoption experience. Responses included topics such as adopted children choosing not to stay connected to their birth culture, having one parent with the same ethnic background as the child, and recognizing issues that the child may experience in the future due to complications that may have taken place before adoption. These responses supported the researcher's hypothesis in that the majority of parents suggested that if they received more useful cultural resources from their adoption agency, the adoption process would be made easier.

Limitations

This study was an exploratory nonrandom pilot and therefore was unable to generalize and compare to the larger population of adoptive families. Significance testing as well as reliability was not completed because of the small sample size. Also, being the first student users in this research class of the Qualtrics online survey system, the researchers encountered complications that resulted in a small sample size.

Implications for Practitioners

The results showed that there is a need to provide adoptive parents with adequate resources that will aid them in assimilation processes. These findings can be disseminated to adoption agency employees, social workers, family life educators, and all other professionals who work with adoptive families. Parents can also be assisted with finding helpful information on their adopted child's birth country that will help them in their parenting strategies towards achievement of assimilation. Parents need to prepare in advance for how they will integrate their child's birth culture into their current life, as well as how they will prepare their children for any potential discrimination that may prevail. Parents need to be provided with information and resources early on in the adoption process in order to prepare them for what is to come. There needs to

be specialized training for professionals working in adoption agencies so that they can provide clients with the appropriate cultural information. The specialized training specific to international adoption is important because without a sense of knowing one's cultural background, adopted children may grow up feeling like they are missing a piece of themselves and their history.

Implications for Future Research

It is recommended that if this study were to be replicated that a larger, random, and more racially diverse sample be used to be able to generalize to adoptive families across the country.

The authors also recommend that the next step of research be to use qualitative interviews with the adoptive parents to be able to go into greater depth regarding their experiences with assimilation.

Conclusion

As a result of this study, it is hoped that adoption agencies will create a system to better enable parents to assure a smooth transition through the international adoption process. Agencies should recognize the importance of providing their clients with relevant information that speaks to their child's birth country before, during, and after the adoption process. Action needs to be taken to gain a better knowledge of how adopted children can attain and improve their positive ethnic identity while at the same time maintaining a link to their birth culture.

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