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INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION OF  
EASTERN EUROPEAN CHILDREN IN NEW ZEALAND:  
ISSUES OF CULTURE

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## **ABSTRACT**

Virtually all of the research on the ethnic identity development of children in intercountry adoption (ICA) has been on transracial adoptions (TRA). Little is known about the ethnic socialisation of internationally adopted children, raised in racially similar adoptive homes. Within the TRA literature, it has been found that transracially adopted children tend to ethnically identify with the white majority culture. That tendency has also been linked to adoptive parents' attitudes about the birth culture, and speculation that most parents are assimilating their children to the dominant culture. Research on TRA has also revealed that despite low ethnic identification, most adoptees score highly on indices of self-concept.

In the present study, 162 New Zealand adoptive families of European descent, with children adopted predominately from Eastern Europe, were surveyed concerning their experiences and attitudes about the importance of their children's birth culture. Results from the surveys showed that the majority of families engaged in a range of cultural activities, and made efforts to socialise with people of their child's birth ethnicity. In addition, most of the adoptive parents expressed a desire that their children ethnically identify with the birth culture, as well as with the New Zealand culture. Almost all of the families researched the birth country before travelling to collect their children, and most parents kept part or all of their child's original name.

A sub-sample of 52 of the adopted children was also interviewed in a second phase of the study. Measures of ethnic identity were obtained, using the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (Phinney, 1992), as were adjustment scores, using the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (Piers, 1984). Findings revealed that overall, the children had moderate identification with the birth culture, and moderate to high self-concept scores, which were not correlated with one another other.

From the parent surveys, a scale was derived to assess the parent's sensitivity to culture. Known as the "Cultural Sensitivity Measure" (CSM), this score was statistically compared to the children's ethnic identity scores, to test the assumption that the parents' attitudes about the birth culture would influence the children's ethnic identification with the birth culture. While the parents had moderate sensitivity scores, no relationship was found between the parents CSM scores and the children's MEIM scores.

Overall, these findings suggest that the internationally adopted children in New Zealand are well adjusted, interested in their ethnic origins, and being parented by New Zealanders who support the children's interest in their birth culture. Future areas of research were identified, and recommendations to families, professionals and policy-makers were offered.

Dedicated to:

**Gramary Roehr**

**[1912 – 2005]**

My most treasured grandmother, who sent me daily prayers  
from across the Pacific Ocean, since this project began.

Your respect for knowledge and education inspired me,  
and your belief in me, and my ability to write this,  
encouraged me ever forward.

It pains me deeply that you did not live to see the completion.

I love you and miss you, Gramary.

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Namaste’

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