Asian American Adoptees Represent a Significant Group to Focus on in Advancing Intersectional Visibility and Data Equity.

Picture caption: Collage featuring the cover page of my research report, some graphics capturing elements of my adoptee experience, and a baby vs. adult picture of myself in traditional Korean dress, or 한복

By Elizabeth Sweet

During my time as a DNA fellow with AAPI Data, I focused on conducting qualitative research that centers Asian American adoptees, their stories, and their experiences. As a transracial Korean American adoptee myself, this research project has been deeply meaningful, allowing me to connect with fellow adoptees.

As I dually serve as the Community Engagement Manager at The National Asian American Pacific Islander Mental Health Association (NAAPIMHA), I have also been prompted to contemplate the mental health impact of undertaking this research that actively embraces and validates my lived experience. There is truly a healing process involved in articulating and reporting on the frustrations, joys, and complexities of your own identity and experience that may have otherwise sat overlooked, obscured, dismissed, or unconveyed. It is an act that involves showing up for your community as much as it is showing up for yourself.

Amplifying the voices of adoptees has been a way for me to reflect on my background and experiences while feeling rooted in solidarity with the larger movement for Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) visibility and data equity. Community-specific data disaggregation is needed along so many dimensions to convey the vast diversity of experiences in our community fully. Specific data can then inform actionable change such as addressing particularly consequential disparities and dismantling monolithic assumptions.

Asian American adoptees exist in a deeply intersectional position within the Asian American and AANHPI community. They possess a nuanced experience that should be highlighted. Adoption is steeped in many historical, political, racial, and social legacies and complexities that give adoptees a unique perspective and strength around broaching complicated dialogues.

Before diving into some of the key findings from my research report, I will lay out some brief context and information about Asian American adoption.

Brief adoption history:
The United States' history of international relations and foreign policy has led Americans to adopt more children from abroad than any other country. Of these transnational adoptions, around half involve children born in Asia. Over the decades, transnational adoption has resulted in a population of Asian American adoptees estimated to number over 300,000 (although there is not a singular, completely verified record or count available). In addition, the majority of Asian adoptees are adopted transracially, referring to having at least one adoptive parent of another race. White adoptive parents of children of color are the predominant type of transracial adoption.

In the United States, transracial adoption has origins in colonialism and imperialism and has become an industry supported by these constructs as well. Many children are adopted as a result of pressures of poverty and stigma around unwed mothers. Intercountry adoption has greatly declined in recent years, as international laws aimed at protecting adopted children have been more widely enacted.

The findings from my adoptee-centered research conversations in the form of interviews and focus groups crystallized into the following report:

> Threads of Visibility: Asian American Adoptees Share Their Experiences, the Nuances of Adoptee Identity, and Ways to Uplift Adoptee Voices

This report aims to uplift the lived experiences of adoptees and contextualize their unique sense of belonging, identity, and positionality in the broader Asian American community and U.S. society at large. This report highlights perspectives from adoptees representing a spectrum of adoptee experiences and backgrounds. The goal of this work is to initiate an ongoing conversation around how to honor intersectional Asian American identities and work toward greater understanding and recognition of the adoptee community.

Key Findings:
The importance of **genuine visibility & representation** for adoptees:

- Asian American adoptees shared experiences that pointed to a fundamental issue of a lack of visibility of the adoptee experience.
- Depictions and discourse around adoption/adoptees are lacking, elusive, and when visible are not genuine to adoptee experiences.
- Adoptees find themselves grasping at threads for some kind of accurate or empowering visibility. There are many problematic media representations and resulting dominant

narratives and negative stereotypes that have shaped public views around adoption and adoptees.
- Ultimately, the lack of adoptee visibility means the adoptee experience is seldom authentically conveyed to others, strongly influencing how adoptees are treated and often perpetuating harm.

The **unique experiences, complexities of identity, & barriers of belonging** for transracial adoptees

- The unique experiences of transracial adoptee upbringing characterized by being raised in predominantly White families and communities tend to create a complex sense of adoptee identity and belonging, often resulting in a positionality of racial or cultural "in-betweenness".
- Connecting with identity for adoptees is often a long, ongoing journey shaped by many systems and factors.
- Adoptees face barriers to feeling true acceptance in spaces with other Asian/Asian American folks, as the underlying cultural displacement of adoption can create a gap between adoptees and fellow Asian Americans.

Recommendations to include and amplify adoptees:
- Demonstrating allyship and a commitment to creating more welcoming and inclusive spaces for adoptees can look like not making assumptions about the universality of cultural, familial, and linguistic experiences of people who identify as Asian American.
- Destigmatize the topic of adoption by recognizing it's okay to talk about it!
    - However, don't ask adoptees to undertake free emotional labor related to fundamentally evaluating the validity of adoption, recognize its nuance.
- Adoptee participants in the study emphasized the need for:
    - More awareness of and advocacy for issues at the heart of the adoptee experience and
    - More investment in representation and authenticity in adoptee storytelling.

Reflections:
Initial hesitations I had about focusing on adoptees for fear of being too "niche" in my research focus have been strongly settled. As participants resoundingly noted, there is not enough visibility and storytelling about adoptees by adoptees. While this is a small, singular entry into the body of work needed to truly do justice to the adoptee experience, I hope it will contribute positively to the introductory case for focusing on this community and identity.

Adoptees represent an important subgroup and experience within the Asian American community and marginalized identities more broadly that need greater visibility. More conversations about adoption and the intentional creation of more inclusive spaces are needed to begin to dismantle prevailing cultural stigmas and create open dialogues. Investment in authentic adoptee storytelling is powerful and can work toward increasing solidarity within our communities as we actively embrace nuanced discussions and unpack uncomfortable truths about the complexities of Asian America. Adoptee identity represents just one intersectional aspect of potential Asian American identity but it is an excellent starting point toward wider efforts to honor the rich, diverse backgrounds that exist in our communities. We should actively pick up the threads of potential sources of storytelling and diversity within our communities, weaving them into the vibrant tapestry reflecting the lived experiences and identities reflected across Asian Americans.

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