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Learning to Be Me: The Role of Adoptee Culture Camps in Teaching Adopted Children Their Birth Culture

Adoptee culture camps arose from the needs of adoptive families to address the unique set of challenges regarding identity formation faced by transnational and transracial adoptees. These camps and the organizations associated with them expose adopted children to their birth culture, as well as to other adoptees. They further serve a larger role of influencing the identities of adoptees, as well as both parents' and children's views of the adoptees' birth cultures. This study addresses the ways in which adoptee culture camps attempt to teach transnational and transracial adoptees their birth culture. While previous research has looked at transnational/cultural adoptees and their parents, it has overlooked the effects of institutions in introducing and shaping the adoptee's experience of his or her native culture. Drawing from interviews and participant observation done at two adoptee culture camps in the Midwest over a period of two summers, I argue that the camps make it clear what types of culture are valued through their focus on the "acceptable" aspects of the children's birth cultures. Through their structure and curriculum, adoptee culture camps highlight those aspects of children's birth cultures that do not contradict or create dissonance with mainstream American culture and can be easily "put on" and removed.