

## The importance of cultural identity in adoption

### A study of young people adopted from Romania

This article by **Celia Beckett, Amanda Hawkins, Michael Rutter, Jenny Castle, Emma Colvert, Christine Groothues, Jana Kreppner, Suzanne Stevens** and **Edmund Sonuga-Barke** examines attitudes regarding cultural and national identity in a group of 165 young people adopted from Romania. The attitudes of their adoptive parents are also explored. The adoptive parents were interviewed over three or four time periods, when their children were 4/6, 11 and 15 years, and the adopted young people at the age of 11 and 15. The majority of the adopted young people had an interest in Romania and expressed a wish to visit their country of origin. However, there was no association between this interest in Romanian identity and levels of self-esteem. The majority of the adoptees saw themselves as English or Anglo-Romanian. A small minority saw themselves as Romanian; these adoptees had both lower self-esteem and a higher level of deprivation-specific problems. The degree of sustained interest shown by adoptive parents in the importance of Romanian identity was associated with the adopted young people's interest in Romania. However, parental interest in this issue had significantly declined by the time the children were 11 years old, by which time fewer adoptive parents than young people had plans to visit Romania in the future.

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#### Introduction

How do young people adopted from abroad perceive the importance of their cultural heritage? To what extent are their views influenced by their adoptive parents' attitudes and do adoptive parents and children share the same views? Is the amount of interest that adopted young people take in their cultural heritage associated with their self-esteem and their level of behavioural difficulties? Is this something that adoptive parents can influence?

Rotheram and Phinney (1987) define ethnic identity as a person's sense of belonging to an ethnic group and the part of one's thinking, perceptions, feelings and behaviour that is due to ethnic group membership. Culture is a

part of ethnicity, with cultural norms and values informing the particular ethnicity and ethnic identity (Smith, 1991).

Self-esteem measures how a young person feels about themselves in comparison with their peers and contemporaries (Rosenberg, 1989). Therefore, it could be hypothesised that feelings of self-worth might be influenced by the young person's concept of their identity and the extent to which this makes them feel different from their peers. Equally, having behavioural problems, such as inattention/over-activity, attachment difficulties or impairments, might affect how young people perceive themselves in relation to their peers (Goodman *et al*, 1995; Hoza *et al*, 1999). Issues about identity might also increase the degree of emotional or conduct difficulties experienced by an adopted person.

Meta-analyses of studies of adopted children have indicated that they do not generally have self-esteem levels lower than those of non-adoptees and there have been no overall differences found in self-esteem between transracially and same-race adoptees (Juffer and van IJzendoorn, 2007). However, it is not known whether there are differences in self-esteem between groups of adoptees according to their sense of identity, rather than according to whether they are transracially adopted. Studies of adult intercountry adoptees indicate that, as a group, they are more likely to have mental health, social and economic difficulties than other children in the same families who were not adopted (Hjern and Alleback, 2002; Lindblad *et al*, 2003), with comparable rates to non-adopted children who are from immigrant families. It has been suggested that these elevated levels of difficulties for intercountry adoptees

may be due to the child having a different sense of nationality or ethnic status from the adopted country (Irhammar and Cederblad, 2000; Juffer, 2006). However, it is equally possible that their problems are related to other pre-adoption factors, such as experiences of deprivation. That said, when Juffer (2006) explored this in young inter-country adoptees (aged 7), she found an association between a sense of difference and externalising behavioural difficulties that did not appear to be related to earlier factors.

Studies of other groups of children born with dual heritage (Tizard and Phoenix, 1995) have suggested that there may be a range of different identifications found within such groups. The multifaceted nature of racial and ethnic identity was explored in Rutter and Tienda (2005), its formation evolving and changing as different ethnic groups established themselves within society as a result of immigration and inter-relationships (Mahood, 2005). For intercountry adoptees, the experiences may be different again, and possibly more complex as they are a very small minority group within UK society and do not share their heritage with that of their adopted family.

Qualitative studies of transracially or transnationally adopted adults (Harris, 2004; Patel, 2007) have indicated that there are a variety of ways in which adoptees explore and establish their identity. Research suggests that racial minority adoptees construct their own ethnic and cultural identity, in part, by retaining connection to their own racial backgrounds while simultaneously assimilating parts of the dominant culture and racial identity; transcultural adoptees commonly use hyphenated terms to describe their ethnicity, for example, Chinese-American (Tan and Nakkula, 2004). In addition, children appear to progress through different stages of racial and cultural understanding (Lee and Quintana, 2005).

The degree of interest in a child's ethnicity and culture may be influenced by their adoptive parents' perspective

but the evidence is varied. In some studies (Lee *et al.*, 2006) it has been found that adoptive families are less likely to consider these as important if there are less obvious racial differences, as with children from Eastern Europe, although other studies suggest the opposite, namely that these adopters do acknowledge the importance of their children's cultural background, even where they are from the same ethnic background (Scherman and Harre, 2004). Similarly, some research has concluded that if adoptive parents show a positive interest in their child's ethnicity, this may increase the degree of interest taken by the adopted child in their heritage (Lee and Quintana, 2005), while other studies suggest that when adoptive parents do not show an interest in their child's heritage, their adopted child may become more preoccupied with identity issues (Irhammar and Cederblad, 2000).

The English and Romanian Adoptee (ERA) study offers new evidence to examine these hypotheses. It has provided a further opportunity to explore how adoptees from Romania feel about their cultural heritage and identity, to see how this has been influenced by their adoptive parents and ascertain whether it is related to their sense of well-being. Is an interest in cultural heritage or identifying with one's original nationality a positive or negative factor in adjustment for intercountry adoptees, or is it unrelated to other outcomes? Do adoptive parents influence attitudes by promoting or negating an active interest in their children's culture? These issues are important for understanding the needs of intercountry adoptees and helping adoptive parents to address them.

### **Aims**

The aim of this article is first to examine whether cultural identity is important to young people adopted from Romania and their adoptive parents. The question of whether the adoptees' interest is influenced by the adoptive parents' attitudes will then be explored.

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Thirdly, we investigate any associations between the young people's interest in cultural identity and their sense of well-being. The results are examined in relation to the young people's gender, their age when they joined their families, their level of behavioural difficulties and any changes that have occurred over time. We examine two hypotheses. The first is that children adopted from abroad will have a more positive sense of well-being if their adoptive parents take a pride and interest in their origins. The second is that the children will be more likely to reject their new cultural identity if they have lacked the opportunity to learn about their origins because their adoptive parents either did not consider them to be important or found them hard to talk about.

## Methodology

### Sample

The sample comprises 165 children who took part in the ERA study. They were adopted from Romania between 1990 and 1992 when aged between a few weeks and three-and-a-half years, following the overthrow of the Ceauşescu regime. The children who were under two years of age on arrival were selected according to a random strategy in age bands matched for gender, but the children over two were all selected up to an upper age limit of three-and-a-half years. There were more girls (65%) than boys (35%) in the oldest group.

The adoptive parents of the children who were under two years of age on arrival were first interviewed when the child was aged four, but the parents of the older children were first seen when the child was six, as they had already passed their fourth birthday by the start of the study. All adoptive parents (165) completed the interview when the child was four or six years old, 159 at age 11 and 140 at age 15; 133 of the Romanian adoptees completed the adoption interview at age 11 and 121 of them at age 15. The sample was compared to a group of families who had adopted

babies (under the age of six months) within the UK ( $n = 52$ ) (for more details see Castle *et al*, 2000). In order to assess the impact of length of deprivation, the Romanian sample was also analysed according to the age of the children on arrival, both as a continuous measure in complete months and according to those who spent less or more than six months in a very deprived context.

The adoptive parents were generally highly educated and from middle- or upper-class backgrounds. While it is generally the case that UK adopters are from higher Socioeconomic Status (SES) backgrounds (Ivaldi, 1998), the process of adopting from abroad also requires people to have access to individual means, so they need to have sufficient disposable income. This obviously rules out many poorer families. They had been highly motivated to adopt, had travelled to Romania and generally met the birth parents (Beckett *et al*, 1999). The overwhelming majority of the adoptive parents were of white British origin, with only a few with one partner from another European country. At the time (the early 1990s) intercountry adoption was relatively unusual and was not supported by UK adoption agencies, so these adopters were rarely offered training or preparation for the task they were undertaking (Beckett *et al*, 1999). It was not known, therefore, how much they would appreciate the need to support their adopted children's interest in their identity. However, as they had been highly motivated and had overcome many obstacles to adopt and had spent some time in Romania, they had considerable first-hand knowledge of the country from which their child had come. The majority had adopted just one child from Romania, but 31 families had adopted two and, of these, 17 had both children participating in the study. This enabled a comparison of attitudes within families.

### Background

The children were adopted mainly from Romanian institutions where they had been placed as a result of poverty and social exclusion (Children's Health Care Collaborative Study Group, 1992). Only a minority ( $n = 21$ ) came direct from families. The population of Romania is over 90 per cent Romanian, defined by a common language, but there has been substantial movement of peoples within the region and the population includes many from different ethnic backgrounds. The majority of the population are Caucasian, but there are a substantial minority of Roma people (estimates vary between 5 and 10% of the population), and within the Romanian population there is also a wide range of different groups, for example, from Latin and Slavic backgrounds. The Roma population in Romania, as in other Eastern European countries, suffers from social exclusion and was highly disadvantaged within a society that in the early 1990s was generally impoverished. As the adopters did not always know the ethnicity of the children they adopted, we were unable to gather reliable information on this aspect of children's backgrounds, but some of the sample were noticeably different in ethnicity from their adoptive parents. At the time that the families adopted, conditions in Romanian institutions were exceptionally poor. This may have influenced the attitudes of adopters to the country from which their child came. There have since been many changes in Romania as it has attempted to accede to the European Union and communication between Britain and Romania has become more open.

### Measures

The adoptive parents were interviewed when their children were aged four, six, 11 and 15 years old and asked for their views on the importance of Romanian identity. When the child was 11, they were also asked whether he or she was teased or bullied about his or her Romanian background. At age 15 follow-up, the parents were asked how

their children perceived their ethnicity and whether they had any difficulty in accepting their Romanian heritage. The adoptees were also assessed at these ages and asked at 15 years, as part of a wider adoption interview (Hawkins *et al*, 2007b), about their views on Romania. They were asked whether they had any contact with other Romanian adoptees, whether they were interested in finding out more about Romania, for example, by reading books, watching TV programmes or whether they wanted to visit. They were also questioned about whether they thought their parents found it hard to talk about their background from Romania, and whether they felt that their life would have been different if they had been a birth child in their new family.

Assessments were made of the children's self-esteem at age 11 and 15 using the Rosenberg measure of self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1989). This measure has established reliability. While there are no established norms for self-esteem, a population sample of young adolescents in Ireland was found to have mean levels of 18 points on the Rosenberg scales (Gabhainn and Mullan, 2003), with adopted children or young people having equivalent levels to the wider population (Juffer and van IJzendoorn, 2007). Measures were also taken of the children's behavioural and cognitive difficulties at ages six and 11 (Rutter *et al*, 2001; Kreppner *et al*, 2007). The behavioural difficulties and impairments measured were separated into those associated with the children's earlier experiences of deprivation, cognitive impairment, inattention, disinhibited attachment and autistic problems, and those that had not been found to be associated with deprivation, emotional, conduct and peer problems.

### Results

#### Adoptive parents' views on the importance of Romanian identity

When the parents were first interviewed around the children's fourth or sixth birthdays, they were asked whether they

Table 1

**The association between the adoptees' interest in Romania and their perception of nationality**

Described themselves as	Interest in Romania			
	No interest	Some interest	Definite interest	
English	27 (37%)	33 (45%)	13 (18%)	73 (66%)
A mixture of Romanian and English or other	4 (14%)	13 (46%)	11 (39%)	28 (25%)
Romanian	1 (10%)	5 (50%)	4 (40%)	10 (9%)
Total	32 (27%)	51 (48%)	28 (25%)	111

Chi square for trends = 7.25, p<.01

thought that their child's Romanian identity was important. Two-thirds said that it was either very important (32%) or important (31%). At age 11, the parents were asked the same question again but by this stage the figures had fallen to 12 per cent and 25 per cent respectively. This represented a significant decline in the parents' perception of the importance of Romanian identity between ages six and 11 [t (158) = -6.19, p<.001].

**Adoptees' interest in Romania**

The adopted young people were asked at age 15 whether they were interested in finding out more about Romania; 44 per cent expressed a marked degree of interest and 27 per cent some interest, with just over a quarter saying that they had no interest at all (29%). Adoptees who were definitely interested in Romania were older when they joined their families, the mean ages of the two groups being 18.36 months versus 12.54 months [t (66) = -2.14, p<.05].

Adoptees' interest in Romania was only found to be significantly higher when parents sustained their interest in the importance of Romanian identity until the young adoptees were aged 11 years (Spearman's correlation r = .25, p <.05).

**Perceptions of ethnicity**

When their children were aged 15, the adoptive parents were asked how they thought that their child perceived his or her nationality. The majority of parents

said that the children saw themselves as English – n = 90 (67%) – but a minority – 13 (9%) – reported that they perceived themselves as Romanian. Most of the rest – 30 (23%) – thought that their children saw themselves as a mixture of English and Romanian while a few others (n = 3) were said to have an 'other' sense of identity – in one case 'Jewish', in another a mixture of black and Welsh and for one unspecified. Children who were no longer living in the UK tended to identify with their new country of domicile and for the purposes of analysis were counted the same as those who saw themselves as English.

There was a significant association between parents' assessment of their adopted children's self-perception as English, Anglo-Romanian or Romanian and whether the children took an interest in Romania, as shown in Table 1. The adoptees who saw themselves as English were less likely to have an interest in their country of origin than those who saw themselves as either Anglo-Romanian [t (101) = -2.65, p<.01] or Romanian [t (82) = -1.95, p=.05]. There were no gender differences in the degree of this interest [t (120) = 1.22, n.s.]. The majority of the adoptees who saw themselves as English, nevertheless, still showed some or a definite interest in finding out more about Romania (63%; see Table 1).

The adoptees who saw themselves as Anglo-Romanian were more likely to have adoptive parents who viewed their

**Table 2**  
**Contact wanted with other adoptees and interest in Romania**

Contact wanted with other adoptees	Interest in Romania			
	None	Some	Definite	
No	15 (79%)	19 (54%)	3 (14%)	
Maybe	1 (5%)	2 (6%)	0 (0%)	
Yes	3 (16%)	14 (40%)	18 (86%)	$\chi^2 (4) = 21.03, p < .001$

**Table 3**  
**Planned visits to Romania by adoptive parents and young people's interest in going there**

Child's wish to visit again	Adoptive parents' plans to visit			
	None	Intended	Planned	Already visited
No	18 (21%)	2 (8%)	0 (0%)	4 (14%)
Maybe	9 (11%)	1 (4%)	0 (0%)	22 (79%)
Yes	59 (69%)	22 (88%)	7 (100%)	2 (7%)
Total	86	25	7	
Already visited but plans to visit again		(6)	(3)	28

Romanian identity as important when the children were either aged four or six [t (123) = -1.98 p = .05] or 11 years old [t (121) = -2.10, p < .05] than was the case for those who perceived themselves as English. However, this did not apply to those who saw themselves as Romanian; their adoptive parents did not display a greater interest in the importance of Romanian identity at age 4/6 [t (100) = -.20, n.s.] or age 11 [t (98) = -.53, n.s.] compared with those who saw themselves as English.

**Teasing and bullying about ethnic status**

The adoptive parents were asked whether their children were picked on because of their background. The parents reported that 38 per cent of the sample were affected in this way. This vulnerability was not found to be related to the young people's self-esteem [age 11 t (140) = 1.18, n.s.; age 15 t (120) = .82, n.s.] nor their sense of interest in Romania (r = -.02, n.s.), but it was

associated with their self-perceptions as Romanian, Anglo-Romanian or English (Spearman's correlation r = .16, p = .06). Those who saw themselves as Anglo-Romanian or Romanian experienced slightly higher levels of bullying (31% of those who saw themselves as English, 58% Anglo-Romanian and 39% of those who saw themselves as Romanian).

**Contact with other adoptees**

Many of the young people had been in contact with other Romanian adoptees (59%). This was because their adoptive parents had been actively involved in support groups for intercountry adopters, especially in the early stages of the adoption. Forty-one per cent did not have contact with other Romanian adoptees, but 40 per cent of the overall sample expressed an interest in having some or more of such contact. This desire was associated with an interest in Romania, as shown in Table 2.

**Interest in visiting Romania**

The adoptees were asked whether they would like to visit Romania at some stage in the future, as shown in Table 3. Of the 119 children responding, 75 per cent (n = 89) said they definitely wished to visit Romania or visit it again (32 had already visited), and a further eight per cent (n = 10) answered 'maybe'. In contrast, 75 per cent (n = 110) of the 147 parents who were asked about visiting Romania when the adoptees were age 15 reported that they had no plans to go with their child in the foreseeable future.

The 32 adoptees who had already visited Romania did not differ in age at placement or gender, but were more likely to be children whose adoptive parents were interested in the importance of Romanian identity at either the first interview at age 4/6 [t (162) = 3.98, p < .01] or when the adopted child was 11 years old [t (132) = 2.57 p < .05]. These adoptees were also more likely to see themselves as Anglo-Romanian rather than either Romanian or English [ $\chi^2 (2) = 14.07, p < .01$ ]. Fifteen of the 33

children (42%) who saw themselves as Anglo-Romanian had visited Romania but only three of the 13 children (23%) who identified themselves as Romanian had done so and only 11 of the 90 (12%) young people who saw themselves as English had ever been there. There was no association between having visited and level of interest in their country of origin (Spearman's correlation = .14, n.s.).

The adoptees were also asked whether they would ever consider living in Romania. Fifteen (9%) said they would consider it and a further five (3%) that they would definitely like to live in Romania at some stage in the future. Of these two groups, eight (40%) had already visited the country.

#### **Feeling different**

Forty-eight (41%) of the 118 Romanian adopted young people interviewed (< 6 months 29%, > 6 months 48%) felt that life would have been different if they had been a birth child in their adoptive family. This was in marked contrast to the UK sample where only two (5%) of the 38 young people interviewed felt this way. Those who believed that life would have been different if they had been born to their adoptive family also had lower self-esteem at age 11 [ $t(120) = 3.07, p < .01$ ; mean self-esteem 19.14 vs 20.75], but by age 15 this contrast in self-esteem had diminished [ $t(102) = 1.25, n.s.$ ; mean self-esteem 20.21 vs 21.41]. However, the adoptees who felt that life would have been different as a birth child were also those who had experienced more deprivation-specific difficulties at age six [ $t(115) = -3.46, p < .01$ ] and at age 11 [ $t(115) = -2.70, p < .01$ ] and who were more likely to perceive their ethnicity as Anglo-Romanian or Romanian [ $\chi^2$  for trends = 4.40,  $p < .05$ ].

#### **Patterns within families**

Of the 17 families who had two children taking part in the study, 28 children (14 families) had completed the adoption interview at age 15. Of these, only one in four children shared the same degree

of interest in Romania; two-thirds (eight pairs) were reported by their adoptive parents to share a sense of their nationality (six English and two Anglo-Romanian) and four pairs were reported to have a different concept of their nationality.

#### **Self-esteem**

There was an overall group difference in self-esteem between the Romanian and the UK sample [ $F(2, 187) = 4.23, p < .05$ ] at ages 11 and 15, but this was only significant between the within-UK group and the Romanian adoptees who were aged over six months when they joined their families [ $t(137) = -3.50, p < .001$ ], with the UK group having higher self-esteem than the children in the Romanian sample. All three groups had similar scores for self-esteem to those found in other population studies (Gabhainn and Mullan, 2003), with figures ranging from 17.98 to 21.92 at age 11 and 18.95 to 22.05 at age 15.

#### **Sense of origins and self-esteem**

Parents thought that 37 (23%) of the young people in the Romanian sample had some or great difficulty in accepting their Romanian background and they were by their own report less likely to be interested in the country [ $t(116) = 2.03, p < .05$ ]. These children did not have lower self-esteem at either age 11 [ $F(2, 126) = 1.07, n.s.$ ] or age 15 [ $F(2, 114) = 1.62, n.s.$ ] than those who had no such difficulty (mean Rosenberg score for those with difficulty in accepting background at age 11 = 18.86 at age 15 = 20.24; mean score those who did not have difficulty at age 11 = 19.94 at age 15 = 20.81).

In contrast, 26 children (21%) reported that it was their adoptive parents who found it harder to talk about their background. These children had lower self-esteem at both age 11 [ $t(109) = 2.03, p < .05$ ] and at age 15 [ $t(107) = 3.30, p < .01$ ] than those whose parents did not have such difficulties (mean score of those who considered that their parents had difficulty talking at age 11 = 18.00, at age 15 = 17.74, for children

Table 4

**Associations between perceptions of nationality, predictors and outcomes**

	English (E)	Perception of nationality Anglo-Romanian (A/R)	Romanian (R)		Significant contrasts
Age on arrival	13.69 (11.28) (n = 90)	19.06 (12.01) (n = 36)	19.62 (10.81) (n = 13)	(2,136) = 3.70*	E vs AR and R
Deprivation-specific problems at age 6	.49 (.83) (n = 90)	.86 (1.02) (n = 36)	1.23 (1.01) (n = 13)	(2,135) = 5.04**	E vs AR and R
Deprivation-specific problems at age 11	.43 (.77) (n = 89)	.49 (.70) (n = 36)	1.15 (1.21) (n = 13)	(2,132) = 4.65*	E vs R
Non-deprivation- specific problems at age 6	.36 (.74) (n = 90)	.58 (.91) (n = 36)	.61 (.77) (n = 13)	(2,135) = 1.37 n.s.	No significant contrasts
Non-deprivation- specific problems at age 6	.61(.99) (n = 89)	.69 (.76) (n = 36)	1.00 (.28) (n = 13)	(2,132) = .99 n.s.	No significant contrasts
Self-esteem at age 11	20.90 (4.31) (n = 79)	17.79 (4.7) (n = 34)	14.82 (2.60) (n = 11)	(2,121) = 13.27 ***	E vs AR and R
Self-esteem at age 15	21.16 (4.22) (n = 27)	20.55 (5.31) (n = 31)	16.67 (7.53) (n = 9)	(2,114) = 3.50*	E vs R

E = English; R = Romanian; A/R = Anglo-Romanian

\*p = <0.5; \*\*p = <.01; \*\*\*p = <.001

whose parents did not have difficulty talking at age 11 = 20.00 and at age 15 = 21.41). Those who felt that their parents had problems talking about their background were also more likely to see themselves as Anglo-Romanian (9/25, 36%) or Romanian (4/25, 16%) than those who considered that their parents had no trouble: Anglo-Romanian (22/86, 26%); Romanian (5/86, 6%); English (chi sq for trends = 4.45, p<.05).

Associations between perceived ethnic identity, duration of deprivation and level of deprivation and non-deprivation-specific behavioural difficulties and self-esteem were then examined (Table 4). This showed that there were significant differences between the adoptees' perception of ethnicity and their age when they joined their families, their degree of deprivation-specific difficulties at age six and 11 and their self-esteem at age 11 and 15.

Those who saw themselves as Romanian tended to be older when they joined their families than those who saw themselves as English [t (101) = 1.78, p = .08], although this result did not

reach statistical significance; they also had elevated levels of deprivation-specific behavioural difficulties and impairments at both age six and 11, and lower levels of self-esteem at both age 11 [t (90) = 4.55, p<.001] and 15 [t (86) = 2.75, p<.01]. This association with self-esteem remained significant when their deprivation-specific problems were taken into account [at age 11 F (1, 85) = 18.46, p<.001; at age 15 F (1, 83) = 5.10, p<.05]. They did not have elevated levels of non-deprivation-specific problems (see Table 4).

Adoptees who perceived themselves as Anglo-Romanian were also older on placement [t (124) = -2.37, p<.05] and had higher levels of deprivation-specific problems at age six, but not at age 11. The young people who perceived themselves as Anglo-Romanian also had lower self-esteem at age 11 [t (111) = 3.41, p<.001], but not at age 15 [t (105) = .26, n.s.] than those who saw themselves as English. The association with self-esteem at age 11 remained significant when controlled for their deprivation-specific problems [F (1, 11) = 9.42, p <.01]. They too did not have



higher non-deprivation-specific problems.

### **Association of interest in Romania and outcomes**

There was no association between an interest in Romania and the degree of difficulties the children had at either age six [ $F(2, 118) = .14, n.s.$ ] or at age 11 [ $F(2, 118) = .52, n.s.$ ], nor any relationship between their interest in Romania and their self-esteem at age 11 [ $F(2, 112) = 2.05, n.s.$ ]. But there was a modest relationship between being interested in Romania and self-esteem at age 15, with those who had a definite interest in Romania having slightly lower self-esteem [ $18.71$  vs  $21.42, F(2, 110) = 3.39, p < .05$ ]. However, those who were definitely interested were also older when they joined their families and when this was taken into account, the difference in self-esteem was no longer significant [ $F(2, 109) = 1.97, n.s.$ ].

### **Discussion**

This study explored the following hypotheses: (1) that children adopted from Romania would have a more positive sense of identity if their adoptive parents took a pride and interest in their origins; and (2) that the children would be more likely to want to identify with their country of origin if their parents were not interested in their identity.

We found that there was an association between the adoptive parents' interest in the importance of Romanian identity and the interest in Romania taken by their adopted children, but this was significant only if this was a sustained interest. Those adoptive parents with an interest in the importance of Romanian identity were also somewhat more likely to have children who considered that they had a dual identity, but not more likely to have children who saw themselves as Romanian. Nevertheless, the variation within families also suggested that this was as much influenced by the children's own views as by those of their adoptive parents. Also there was a tendency for the adop-

tive parents who were more interested in Romanian identity to adopt older children who had greater difficulties and these children were more likely to feel different. Over the years, there will be a subtle interaction between the adoptive parents' attitudes towards the adopted person's background, the interaction of the adopted young person and their peers and the adopted young person's own interest in their identity that will shape their views. This process will continue into adulthood.

Identifying with a dual or original nationality was not associated with higher self-esteem; at age 11 the group who saw themselves as Anglo-Romanian had experienced lower self-esteem than those who considered themselves as English, although by 15 self-esteem did not differ between these groups; they were also both older on arrival than those who saw themselves as English and had experienced a higher level of deprivation-specific difficulties at age six. Those who saw themselves as Romanian had lower self-esteem at both age 11 and age 15 and had higher levels of deprivation-specific problems at age six and 11; they also did not generally have adoptive parents who were supporting their interest in Romania. The finding that the adopted young people who perceived themselves as Romanian or Anglo-Romanian had higher levels of deprivation-specific difficulties, but not other forms of behavioural problems, suggests that difficulties that predated their sense of identity made them more vulnerable to having lower self-esteem, although this might have been exacerbated by a reluctance to talk about their background. This suggests that within any group of adoptees who have experienced early deprivation, there are those who, as a result, struggle more with their sense of well-being and, if placed across cultures, also with their identity.

The majority of the young people who saw themselves as English were also interested in Romania. Only a quarter of them were totally uninterested. This group did not have lower self-esteem compared to the others but were gen-

erally younger when they joined their families. Young people adopted from Romania were more likely to feel that their life would have been different if they had been a birth child than those adopted within the UK, and this feeling was more marked for those who were older on arrival.

This complex pattern of results indicates that an adopted child's interest in his or her background has many presentations (see Harris, 2004; Lee and Quintana, 2005; Patel, 2007). Some, but not all, may be more interested in their identity if their adoptive parents encourage this; for others their motivation seems to be as strong despite their adoptive parents' lack of interest. Some who did not feel that their adoptive parents were interested in their cultural background found this situation difficult, but conversely there were others who did not maintain any interest whether their adoptive parents promoted the idea or not.

Overall, it was found that adopted young people were more interested in their origins than their adoptive parents. Most parents considered it was important to encourage this interest when they were first interviewed, but by the age of 11 this had declined, with less than half of the adoptive parents thinking it was still important or very important, and a corresponding decline in thinking of a trip to Romania.

What is not known is how these issues about cultural and national identity will develop further as the adopted young people move into adulthood. Studies have indicated that interest in searching for origins are cyclical and are more likely to develop when adopted young people reach their late 20s (Smith and Wallace, 2000). A study of intercountry adoptees in Ireland found that it was the young adults who were more conscious of their different ethnic status, rather than younger adoptees, so it may be that as young people face adult life choices, partnerships and employment, these issues become more salient (Greene *et al.*, 2007).

This study confirms that some

adopted young people who identified with their country of origin rather than their new country were those who found it harder to communicate with their adoptive parents about their background; these adoptees had lower self-esteem, but they also had a greater level of deprivation-specific problems related to the length of time that they had spent in deprivation. Both in this study and in previous ones (Irhammar and Cederblad, 2000; Juffer, 2006), there has been identified a small sub-group of young people adopted from abroad who have felt disaffected, had poorer self-esteem, felt different from their adoptive family and tended to identify strongly with their country of origin. The finding of lower self-esteem remains significant even when controlled for the level of difficulties these children have experienced. However, the numbers in this study were very small to draw any firm conclusions. There is also some evidence that over time there are changes in self-esteem and those who were particularly sensitive regarding issues about identity and feeling different from their adopted family had higher self-esteem at age 15 than at 11.

In contrast, for other adopted young people, there appears to be a sense of a dual identity/heritage and a strong level of interest in Romania, which seems to reflect the interest that their adoptive families had encouraged and promoted in origins. The young people with a sense of dual identity had lower self-esteem at the age of 11, but not at age 15, and again their lower self-esteem at age 11 was also related to other deprivation-specific difficulties. They were older when they joined their families and their lower self-esteem at age 11 may also have reflected a greater sensitivity in this group during early adolescence about adoption and background issues (Brodzinsky, 1987; Smith and Brodzinsky, 1994). In earlier work on the ERA study, it was found that the level of difficulty in talking about adoption was more marked at age 11 than at age 15 (Hawkins *et al.*, 2007a, b; Beckett *et al.*, 2008). The finding that

their self-esteem at age 15 did not differ from those who saw themselves as English suggests that there was no long-term effect on self-esteem of their dual sense of identity. It is also important to stress that although there are variations between the different groupings in self-esteem, generally the self-esteem of the adopted children in this sample was high. This confirms the findings of Juffer and van IJzendoorn (2007) that the self-esteem of adoptees is similar to that of the general population.

The study also found that the majority of adoptees were interested in going to Romania. A number of adopted young people had already visited there, but there were many more adoptees who would welcome the opportunity. Perhaps as adults they would be able to do this independently, but this was not currently on the agenda for many of their adoptive parents. A number also had contact with other adoptees from Romania, but others lacked this opportunity and would have liked such contact.

The study confirms the findings of other researchers (Simon and Alstein, 1992; Tan and Nakkula, 2004) that the most likely identification chosen by transnational adoptees after that of the host country is a dual identity, ie Anglo-Romanian, rather than Romanian. Although the majority saw themselves as English, this did not mean that they had no interest in Romania. It was only a minority – roughly a quarter of the Romanian sample – who saw themselves as English and were not at all interested in their country of origin. The children who saw themselves as English were generally younger at placement than those who considered themselves as Anglo-Romanian or Romanian.

#### **Strengths and limitations**

Previous findings from this study have indicated that the perceptions of the young person and their adoptive parents on issues regarding adoption are not always shared (Beckett *et al*, 2008) and that adopted children do not always tell their adoptive parents what they are

thinking (Hawkins *et al*, 2007b), so it is possible that this could lead to an under-reporting of some of the adoptees' views, for example on their nationality, as reported by their adoptive parents. Also, this particular group of adopters were all highly motivated and spent considerable time in Romania arranging the adoptions, so their experiences might differ from that of other intercountry adopters where the arrangements are made by an agency. The strengths of this study are the opportunity to learn the views of both the adoptive parents and the young people, the use of multiple measures and the opportunity to compare attitudes over time.

#### **Summary and implications**

To summarise, there appeared to be a variety of ways that this sample of intercountry adopted young people constructed a sense of cultural identity at age 15. First, there were those who were not at all interested and saw themselves as English; second, those who were interested in their background and saw themselves as either Anglo-Romanian or English; and third, those who perceived themselves as Romanian and were interested in their background. Within the sample, there was also a particularly vulnerable group who had a higher level of deprivation-specific problems and also struggled more with their sense of identity and well-being. As suggested by Mahood (2005), Lee and Quintana (2005) and Patel (2007), a sense of cultural identity is a developing construct and the full story will not emerge until adulthood. It is argued by some that the dominant society attempts to make the child accept their cultural heritage and the adoptees are forced to deny their ethnicity (see Hubinette, 2004). This study indicates that the majority of adoptees do want to identify with the cultural and national heritage of their birth country and for some this is not supported by their adopted families. However, approximately a quarter of the sample said that they were not at all interested in their cultural and

ethnic heritage; they appeared to have higher self-esteem than some of those who were interested in their background, so a lack of interest does not always appear to be a negative factor. Maybe for some adoptees it represented a feeling of being totally accepted by their new family. This is not to imply that these issues will not become more important as they grow into adulthood.

A key finding is that while adoptive parents' interest in their children's cultural and ethnic background may decrease over time, for the adopted young people this does not appear to be the case; they did not lose interest and appeared to have a stronger interest in Romania than their adoptive parents and want to have the opportunity to find out more and to visit their country of origin. They also felt a greater sense of difference from their adopted family than children who have been adopted from within the UK and this became more marked the older they were when they joined their families.

The evidence of this study suggests that while not all adopted young people share an equal interest in their cultural and national origins, for the majority in this sample there was a definite interest in Romania and a desire to go there. Adoptive parents need to be advised to continue to support their adopted child's interest in their background through to adulthood, but it needs to be acknowledged that some adopted young people may not be actively interested and this may not have any bearing on their self-esteem.

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