

Spring 2011

The Pragmatics of Transracial Adoption: A Parents' Perspective

Ashley Chuha
Providence College

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.providence.edu/socialwrk_students



Part of the [Social Work Commons](#)

Chuha, Ashley, "The Pragmatics of Transracial Adoption: A Parents' Perspective" (2011). *Social Work Theses*. 79.
http://digitalcommons.providence.edu/socialwrk_students/79

It is permitted to copy, distribute, display, and perform this work under the following conditions: (1) the original author(s) must be given proper attribution; (2) this work may not be used for commercial purposes; (3) users must make these conditions clearly known for any reuse or distribution of this work.

The Pragmatics of Transracial Adoption: A Parents' Perspective

Ashley Chuha

Providence College

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Social Work.

2011

Abstract

This study examines the relationship between transracial adoption and racial and ethnic identity development from a parent's perspective. By listening to stories and hearing experiences of these parents, the writer was able to obtain an idea regarding how the family as a whole views race and how the child expresses his or her differences within the family context. A review of the literature indicates that transracial adoption is an ongoing debate because of the importance of finding a permanent placement for a child and the potential loss of a cultural heritage by not living with a family of the same race or ethnicity. This study is a qualitative exploratory study, involving semi-structured interviews with five families who have adopted transracially. The main findings of this study are that the participants have largely adopted a colorblind approach when raising their children, that the children of these participants bring up questions or concerns about being different from their parents, and that exposure to people of the same race or ethnicity as the children varied family to family. The implications of this study include more in depth interviews with more families, interviewing transracially adopted children, and providing trainings and support groups for families adopting or having adopted transracially.

The Pragmatics of Transracial Adoption: A Parents' Perspective

The following study examines the relationship between transracial adoption and racial and ethnic identity development from a parent's perspective. Transracial adoption is an adoption in which the child is adopted by parents of a different race or ethnicity. The most common transracial adoptions in the United States involve white parents adopting black, Latino, or Asian children. This study will look at parents' perceptions of whether or not the adopted children have racial or ethnic identity development issues and of what parents do to cope with these issues. It is important to examine at what age, if at all, these issues develop and whether or not the parents' ways of dealing with these issues are effective. This topic became of interest to the researcher when working with a Latina girl at an elementary school who was adopted into an all black family. At age ten, racial and ethnic identity was becoming a real problem for her as she struggled to find a place in her family system. As she was struggling to cope with thoughts and feelings about "who she is" and "why she does not look like her parents and sisters," I was asked to step in as a mentor figure to help her work through these thoughts and emotions. This girl did not have the support of her family members, which was detrimental in helping her cope with these issues. This case sparked an interest in me to examine further transracial adoption and racial and ethnic identity development, in terms of how the parents handle certain situations.

The topic of transracial adoption and racial and ethnic identity development is significant because of the large number of such adoptions in the United States. Studying the relationship between transracial adoption and racial and ethnic identity development from a parent's perspective is relevant to social work because if one is working in the

child welfare or educational system, it is important to have this knowledge when working with a client who was transracially adopted. If a social worker is working with an adult client and the client has children who are transracially adopted, this study could be a useful guide on how to parent children trying to resolve racial and ethnic identity development issues. There have been a significant number of studies done on the relationship between transracial adoption and racial and ethnic development, but little of this research has been done from the parents' perspective. In the following qualitative study, I will interview five families and ask them about their support systems surrounding transracial adoption, whether or not their adopted children have had racial and ethnic identity development issues, what they have done to help them, and whether or not these techniques have worked.

A Review of the Literature

The following literature discusses the arguments both for and against transracial adoption. The National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) is mentioned in almost every article on transracial adoption because of their strong opinions against placing children with parents of a different race or ethnicity. Advocates of transracial adoption argue that permanency placement is more important to the child's growth, development, and overall well-being than the possibility of a child losing his "native" culture by growing up in a different racial or ethnic family. This literature review aims at reviewing the material relevant to the continual popularity of and the debate surrounding transracial adoption. It is important to review the pertinent information relating to transracial adoption in order to understand the racial and ethnic identity issues that emerge in children and how parents handle these issues.

Before the 1960s, adoption of children of color across racial lines was unthinkable, even though many families already had mixed black, white, or Native American ancestry (Smith, 1996). It was not until after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the legalization of abortion in 1973 that people began to look differently at the transracial adoption option because non-white children were entering state care at an increasing rate (Haymes & Simon, 2003). Along with the increase in the number of transracial adoptions each year in the United States came a debate about the cultural and identity issues raised by transracial adoption. Advocates of transracial adoption argue that a child's staying in foster care throughout his or her life is more detrimental to well-being than being adopted into a family of a different race or ethnicity (Swize, 2002). Opponents, prominently the National Association of Black Social Workers, argue that transracial adoption is cultural genocide for the black community and that children of transracial adoption are not able to develop coping mechanisms necessary to function in an inherently racist society (Silverman, 1993). Learning about the beliefs of both advocates and opponents is essential to understanding how these rationales directly relate to the racial and ethnic identity development issues that emerge in transracially adopted children as they enter adolescence.

Advocates argue that transracial adoption offers unique benefits to adopted children because it allows them the freedom to develop their own identity because they are not racially similar to their parents (Swize, 2002). It is easier for parents to project their hopes and aspirations onto their children who look like them, just like it is easier to credit themselves for their children's accomplishments. If a child is a different race from the parents, there is a noticeable difference between the parents and the child, which

makes it harder for parents to credit themselves for that child's accomplishments. Similarly, transracial adoption highlights the fact of adoption, which reinforces the fact that familial foundation is based on the bonds of relationships and not biology (Swize, 2002). Transracial adoption also encourages greater openness about adoption, which leads to positive identification with the child's adoptive status and racial group, and affirmative reinforcement that the child was chosen and wanted by the family (Swize, 2002). In the case of black children adopted by white families, these children may have access to both the white and black cultures, which are two dominant cultures in society. Such access allows them to navigate the white culture successfully, which works to their advantage in the long run.

Even today, there are reasons why white families choose to not adopt transracially. Some do not want to adopt a child who does not "fit" the family. Prospective parents may think that the child might be harmed by racist attitudes of friends, neighbors, and family or may believe they are not fit to help the child develop a healthy racial identity or deal with racism (Jennings, 2006). When transracial adoption opponents say that white parents are ill equipped to teach their children how to survive in a racist world, what do they say about a biracial child being raised by a single-parent who has no more of a relationship with a part of her own racial identity than a child adopted transracially (Swize, 2002)? Swize argues that adoption is not about "teaching black adopted children the survival skills necessary to navigate a racist society" (p. 1096). It is about providing a child a loving, caring family that will encourage him to continue to grow and develop (Swize, 2002).

The debate over transracial adoption emphasizes a conflict between a child's individual need to be adopted as soon as possible and the community's need to preserve its generational heritage (Smith, 1996). If a child is given secure parents and a stable home as a base for her identity and self-esteem, it will help her develop a healthy racial or ethnic identity and ties to her community of origin (Smith, 1996). In addition, if these stable parents encourage participation in cultural activities and open communication, this will pave the way for the development of an ethnic identity development (Heimsoth & Laser, 2008). It is vital that the parents maintain a balance between honoring the child's heritage and being sensitive to her need for connection and belonging to the community of origin (Heimsoth & Laser, 2008). To adopt a "color blind" approach to transracial adoption would do a disservice to the child and her identity development. The following study will determine if the participating parents have used a "color blind" approach in rearing their children and whether this approach is perceived as effective or not.

Many opponents of transracial adoption believe that along with the suffering of the black community, the adopted child's racial identity suffers when he or she is raised outside of the racial group. One of the most vocal opponents of transracial adoption, the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW), held the first annual convention in 1972 condemning transracial adoption. This had a huge effect on transracial adoption. For example, in 1987, there were 1,169 transracial adoptions of African-Americans and 5,850 transracial adoptions of Asians and Hispanics (Silverman, 1993). The NABSW says, "every possible attempt should be made to place black and other minority children in a cultural and racial setting similar to their original group" (Carter-Black, 2002, p. 344). Family preservation, reunification, and adoption should go

hand-in-hand when working toward finding permanent homes for children. The NABSW also declares that transracial adoption is “genocide for the black culture” (Swize, 2002). In reality, the number of transracial adoptions that happen each year is too small to affect the black culture. Advocates say that concerns for the preservation of black culture are irrelevant in adoption decisions because the best interests of the children are compromised (Swize, 2002). Although opponents have argued that the best interests of the child are to stay immersed in the black culture with black parents, research shows that staying in a non-permanent setting like a group home or a foster home is more detrimental to the child developmentally than a permanent placement (Padilla, Vargas, & Chavez, 2009).

Opponents of transracial adoption also declare that it fails to foster a racial identity and coping skills of the adoptees. In essence, white parents are ill equipped to bequeath a positive black identity to the child, and they are not prepared to teach the survival skills necessary to navigate a still racist society (Swize, 2002). The NABSW is convinced that the white community has not fully accepted transracially adopted children and that most such children have no significant contact with black people. Another measure was taken in 1978 called the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), which places the responsibility for Native American child custody with the child’s tribe. ICWA is an example of the belief that the racial or ethnic community have presumptive claim on retaining the decision making over children in their community (Smith, 1996). Today, Native American adoption remains very low because of the tribe’s influence over the placement of children and their acceptance into the child welfare system.

Another argument against placing black children with white families is that transracial adoption is a manifestation of well-off whites determining what is good for black children. It is representative of whites' feelings of superiority that their economic means entitle them to adopt children of whatever race they please (Smith, 1996). This argument is an example of the deep-rooted racial tensions arising from white domination and failure to recognize blacks as full members of society (Smith, 1996). The second argument is the claim that black children with white parents will not acquire the survival skills to live in a racist society. Black children learn these skills from their black parents and if these parents are white, they will never learn the necessary skills. There is also the notion of the slippery slope problem, which means that transracial adoption will become a large-scale transfer of black children to white homes (Smith, 1996). If this happens, the black culture and community will be at risk. Lastly, opponents of transracial adoption insist that MEPA (Multiethnic Placement Act) and IEP (Interethnic Adoption Provision), whose impact on transracial adoption are explained in depth later in the review, are potentially harmful to black families because they fail to identify the needs of black children and their families by stating that race should not be a factor in determining a permanent placement for children.

According to advocates of transracial adoption, opponents wrongly insist that black children have both a need and a right to the same racial and ethnic cultural heritage into which they were born (Carter-Black, 2002). Scholars in support of transracial adoption, while responding to racial matching of children and adoptive families, have argued that a child's self-esteem, racial identity, and racism-survival skills show that transracial placements do not harm children (Swize, 2002). Advocates argue that any

adoption is a better alternative than long-term foster care. They assert that delaying placement into a permanent home causes serious and real harm to the child because adoptive families can provide children a healthier environment to grow in which and thrive than foster families or institutional facilities (Swize, 2002). Courts and legislators who enforce same-race preference inherently prevent matches, which ignore the value and benefit of a child growing up in a loving, familial setting. In essence, transracial adoption is a way to avoid the social and psychological problems of growing up in the child welfare system (Silverman, 1993). When a child is not permanently placed in an adoptive home, the child is permanently losing developmental experiences of bonding and attachment (Smith, 1996). An adoptive parent states, “to me, a choice for a permanent placement is by far preferable to a long wait for a child in foster care. I believe that there’s more damage that can be done in the wait than in the issue of race” (Smith, 1996, p. 12).

Swize (2002) argues that a transracial adoptee has less internal conflict and is less likely to pretend to herself and others that she is something she is not. Even though there have been instances where the child has minimal internal conflict, like the argument made by Swize suggests, a majority of transracial adoptees feel disconnected from the black community because they are unable to relate to the community. In one study, a child said, “I feel different than black people. I have different feelings. Like I’m more spoiled than they are” (Haymes & Simon, 2003, p. 262). Often, transracially adopted black children have to deal with name-calling and other forms of racism in the overwhelmingly white schools they attend. One black adoptee in a white suburban family expressed, “[my parents] say to me, ‘you are just Rosa to us, there is no Black or

white here.’ But I’m Rosa and Rosa’s black. How do they deal with that? How do they recognize that,” (Smith, 1996, p. 12). Some children of transracial adoption disclose that because white people have raised them, it is more difficult for them to navigate racial difference (Samuels, 2010). It is important to many adoptees to develop a kinship with people in the same racial and ethnicity community. Transracial adoptees also express feeling like a white person, but being treated like a black person in America. Many participants say that they have had cultural socialization within predominantly white contexts, yet they are enduring experiences with racism that often result in differences between their racial and cultural identification (Samuels, 2010). They identify themselves as culturally white, but racially black.

It is the responses of the parents to the needs of their transracially-adopted children that are pivotal in determining the adoptees’ long-term adjustment and the healthy development of an identity (Heimsoth & Laser, 2008). Heimsoth & Laser (2008) found that six out of ten families believed that along with the importance of addressing their child’s cultural heritage, it is vital that they are conscious of the adopted child’s ethnicity. Haymes & Simon (2003) believed that although parents acknowledge the need for greater contact with people of color, they do not alter their lifestyles and tend to minimize the importance of race and downplay the incidents of racial slurs and discriminations. When this is happening inside the family home, the transracial adoptee has a more difficult time establishing a healthy racial and ethnic identity.

In the qualitative study including twenty people, some parents and some transracially adopted children, conducted by Haymes & Simon (2003), parents suggest that while trying to get their children involved in the black community, they feel

unwelcomed in places like black barbershops and churches. Parents also suggest moving to an integrated neighborhood and sending kids to integrated schools so they can develop relationships with kids of the same race. Many parents are looking for support services in learning how to deal with subtle racism and coping mechanisms when people ask questions and stare at their family. In order for parents to parent transracial adoptees successfully, they must develop cultural competence. Cultural competence includes racial awareness, which is sensitivity to racism and discrimination, multicultural planning, by providing opportunities for children to learn about and participate in their native culture, and survival skills, like how to cope with racism (Haymes & Simon, 2003).

Some literature describes ways to enhance the racial and ethnic identity development in transracially adopted children. Social experiences with both white and black racial groups and responses from others, including society at large, have played influential roles in identity development (Kim, Suyemoto, & Turner, 2010). It is equally important to understand the difference between racial and ethnic identity and their effects on the transracial adoptees. It is vital to consider the meanings of experiences with belonging to and exclusion from different groups while simultaneously creating meanings of racial and ethnic identities that reflect personal and social experiences (Kim, Suyemoto, & Turner, 2010). This creates a richer and fuller “identity” for the adoptees. It was also identified that transracial adoptees whose parents had less of a “color blind” approach to race and cultural issues were more likely to support enculturation and racial socialization, which proves beneficial for the child’s identity development in the long run.

Participants in studies have reported that book knowledge, like reading black books and having black dolls, is not enough when it comes to creating more relational methods of acquiring an identity (Samuels, 2010). It is important for transracial adoptees to have a “kinship” with someone who understands what it is like to be the same race as that child. However, building relationships with black people is not always easy because acceptance is hardly automatic. Being immersed in a different ethnic or racial culture growing up makes it harder for transracially adopted children to relate to those of the same race or ethnicity. Consequently, that option of building a kinship with someone is difficult to come by. Being unable to relate to their racial or ethnic culture of origin leaves transracially adopted children with racial and ethnic identity development issues.

Along with there being opponents and advocates throughout the history of transracial adoption, there has also been legislature passed that currently influences adoption recruitment and matching practice. In 1996, there was an amendment made to the 1994 Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA) called the Interethnic Adoption Provision (IEP). The MEPA-IEP removes race as consideration in the placement of foster and adopted children. It was enacted because the numbers of children entering the child welfare system at the time were extremely high and steadily climbing. In general, black children are disproportionately represented in out-of-home placements and are waiting for up to five years to find adoptive homes (Carter-Black, 2002). MEPA’s job is to facilitate moving children out of the child welfare system and into permanent living arrangements. It simultaneously serves as a tool to ensure the elimination of discriminatory practices in approving potential foster and adoptive parents (Carter-Black, 2002). Despite its admirable goal, professionals do identify some problems with MEPA.

Although MEPA and IEP focus on eliminating barriers to transracial placements, they do not address support for families that choose to adopt transracially (Haymes & Simon, 2003). Some also suggest that policies like MEPA constrain the ability of professionals to prepare adopters for culturally attuned parenting (Samuels, 2010).

Studies show that one of the most important benefits of having a healthy ethnic identification is the ability to recognize and cope with prejudice and discrimination (Padilla, Vargas, & Chavez, 2009). By adulthood, transracial adoptees show a greater tendency to identify with their adoptive parents' culture. Studies have also shown that how transracial adoptees recognize and cope with prejudice is difficult, which is problematic because these skills play a vital role in self-identity and the ability to function in society (Padilla, Vargas, & Chavez, 2009). Similar to ethnic identity, cultural identity is not inherited, but acquired and performed through interactions within one's family and the broader environment (Samuels, 2010). Because the transracial adoptees in these studies do not have daily influence or exposure to the black culture and community, they do not ethnically or culturally identify themselves as black. If asked what race they are, most answer that they are biracial. Ethnically they are white, but the rest of world sees them as black.

A thorough review of the literature reveals that there have been many studies conducted regarding the relationship between transracial adoption and racial and ethnic identity development. Subsequently, there have been many suggestions surrounding a "healthy" self-identity development of transracially adopted children. Only one piece of literature, the Haymes and Simon (2003) qualitative study, explains how parents handle questions of racial and ethnic identity, and this piece in the study was not the focal point.

The main findings of this study included narratives from the transracially adopted children. Many families considering transracial adoption would benefit from learning what does and does not work when dealing with questions, concerns, racism, and children not being accepted in the black community. In the following study, whose qualitative method is described in the next section, the pragmatics of transracial adoption will be studied through the eyes of the parents. The parents' techniques in raising children of a different race or ethnicity and the effectiveness of these techniques will be explored.

Methodology

The following study is an exploratory study examining transracial adoption and racial and ethnic identity development from parents' perspectives. The study will first examine how parents understand the racial or ethnic identity development issues of their children as they have developed through childhood into adolescence. Second, the study will examine how the parents have handled racial or ethnic identity development issues and whether or not these techniques are perceived as effective.

Subjects

In order for the subjects to participate in this study, they must be parents who have adopted transracially. The subjects were recruited primarily from a southern New England community through an adoption agency. Because the primary source of recruitment was an adoption agency, snowball sampling was used. The researcher contacted various people through the agency who had adopted transracially and were willing to participate in the study.

Data Gathering

Before the interviews were conducted, the interviewer already knew the demographics, for example how long the child has been with the adoptive parents, the age of the child when he/she was adopted, how old the child is now, whether the child is male or female, what race the child is and what race the parents are. There will be a semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix A), but it will be up to the interviewees to discuss the most important things surrounding racial and ethnic identity development in their child and what they have done to handle the situations that arise. It is important that the interviewees address, either by discussing them through their own experiences or answering the questions that I ask directly, whether there have been racial or ethnic identity development issues present in their child. This is essential in order for the parent(s) give significant instances where the child has faced issues with his/her identity and what the parent(s) have done to handle these issues. The literature suggests that the transracially adopted child should have connections and experiences with his/her native culture, so the interviewer will ask how the child is involved with his/her culture in any way. If so, has this helped or harmed the child's racial or ethnic identity development? At the end of the interview, after the interviewee has shared his/her personal experiences, I will ask the parent how he/she has dealt with the issue about transracial adoption: has the issue been brought up and discussed aside from issues of identity development or is it only mentioned when the child develops identity development issues? The questions and topics of discussion will get narrower as the interview goes on and will end discussing the trials and tribulations of raising transracially adopted children.

Data Analysis

The data will be analyzed based on two things: the information gathered from the content of the interview as well as how the interviewee structured the interview. The interviewer will send the interviewee in the right direction, but the interviewees will structure the interview the way that is most beneficial and meaningful for them. This is just as important as the information actually gathered during the interview. The interview is structured using a funnel approach: it will start off broad and become narrower as the interview goes on to make sure the questions are answered that are essential for data analysis. The purpose of this study is to view transracial adoption from the parent's perspective, so the data will be analyzed by examining the structure of the interview, the nature of the information that is discussed, and what has worked in parenting transracially adopted children.

Findings

The three main findings of this qualitative study via semi-structured interviews of parents who have adopted transracially are: the participants have largely adopted a colorblind approach when raising their children, the children of these participants bring up questions or concerns about being different from their parents, and the exposure to people of the same race or ethnicity of the children varied family to family. The findings will be discussed in this order following a discussion of the participants.

Participants

The researcher interviewed five different families throughout the state about their experiences raising transracially adopted children. The placement length varied from family to family, as did the ages and races of the children.

Nancy.

Nancy is a Caucasian female who is married and has adopted seven children, four of whom are Black and one is Hispanic. Nicole is a Black, sixteen-year-old girl who has been with Nancy since she was two and a half. Laura is fifteen and of Hispanic descent. Amanda and Kelly are nine-year-old Black twins who have been with Nancy since they were a few months old. Michael is a Black, seven-year-old boy who has been with Nancy since he was a few months old.

John.

John is a single white male who has adopted two boys. Andrew is Black and fourteen-years-old, has been living in the home for a year and a half, and Tyler is Caucasian, twelve-years-old and has been living in the home for two and a half years.

Peter.

The third interviewee is a Caucasian male named Peter. He and his partner adopted Puerto Rican brothers. Stephen is four and Anthony is two. Stephen has been with Peter and his partner since he was a year and a half and Anthony came to live with them shortly after birth.

Cindy.

Cindy is a Caucasian female who is married and adopted Lauren, who is fourteen and Black and Portuguese, three years ago and Abby, who is twelve and half black half Mexican, a few months ago.

David.

David, a Caucasian male, and his partner adopted Kate, who is four, and Luke, who is three, six months ago. The children are biological siblings and are both half Black and half Hispanic.

Colorblind Approach

When asked how the racial difference is brought up in the home, Nancy said, “we don’t look at color . . . when DCYF calls and asks us about another foster placement, I don’t ask the race or nationality. It’s a child. And I try to teach my kids to look at people as people and it doesn’t matter if they are white, black, green, red, yellow. It’s a person.”

In the beginning of the interview, John said,

We don’t look at color of skin or anything else like that. A person is a person . . . it’s like a Christmas gift. There’s something special inside, the paper might be different, but it’s still something special inside . . . it’s the inside that matters.

When asked who brings up the racial difference in the home, Cindy said, “we don’t really talk about it...I don’t see it. The only time I notice it is when I look at pictures that I remember she is darker.” Peter did not mention anything related to colorblindness, and he and his partner have made it a point to enroll their children in diverse day cares. “We have concerns about racial and ethnic diversity and two dad family diversity because we have really been welcomed and celebrated at the school we are at now, but we’re mostly worried about having children around him that are racially and ethnically diverse, which is why we have looked at an international charter school.” Since his children are still young, David did not say that ethnic differences have come up in conversation yet. Most of the conversations have been around what their biological mom is doing and their foster

mom, who they refer to as “mommy” sometimes. Luke, the three-year-old, has noticed color but has not asked any questions about it. David disclosed,

I don't think we are going to raise them inclusive or shut them out. We have several books about how families are different . . . Luke will sit there and say, 'oh we've got different colors too' but never any questions. Again, I think that has to do with his age as well.

How Adoption is Brought Up in the Home

The second main finding was that the children are the ones who bring up the fact that they look different and were transracially adopted. For the participants with older children, like Nancy, Cindy, and John, the researcher asked who brings up the fact that the child was transracially adopted. Of these participants, all three said that the children are the ones who bring it up. Nancy said, “it is never really brought up, unless the kids ask.” In the beginning of her interview, when asked to describe any stories or experiences, Nancy said,

I look back at it now and I knew I was Caucasian. I don't remember anyone telling me, I just knew that. I'm assuming that was because I grew up in a white community. Nicole came home from school in the second grade during February, black history month, and they much have been talking about something in school because she came home all excited and said, 'Mommy! Did you know I was African-American?' and I looked at her and said, 'Yeah. Didn't you?' And she didn't. She had no idea.

Learning from that experience, Nancy said, “I quickly realized I needed to bring some literature into this house and educate this poor child on her background, where she came from and what her race is.” In response to the question regarding who brings up the racial difference, John said, “the questions [about the racial difference] were more in the beginning. He wanted to be sure that if he came into this house, would I love him no matter what. I constantly tell him all the time how much I love him. We try to keep the conversation open and honest about everything.” Cindy, as previously stated in the

findings, said that it is never really talked about because she does not look at or notice color. The other two participants, Peter and David, did not discuss their children bringing up color, aside from being aware that they look different than their dads.

Degree of Exposure

The third main finding is that the children in these families had different amounts and types of exposure to people of the same race or ethnicity as them. The researcher asked each participant the level of exposure the children have to people of their same race or ethnicity. The overall contact as well as the type of contact differed family to family as did the influence of the contact on the childrens' racial and ethnic identity developments. Nancy's second oldest biological daughter married a Black man, so their son is Black as well. She said, "And I have to tell you I depend on him a lot. I start off every question with, 'I know this is a stupid question, but I'm white.'" When Nicole came to live with Nancy, "the schools were all white, but they are more integrated now and they have friends and more contact with children of various races." Nancy says that this contact "maybe makes them more comfortable seeing people who are just like them. It must not isolate them like Nicole felt." John says that Andrew has contact with children of different races on the basketball team. Although, "he has never really looked at that as being an issue. As I have said, we faced that more in the beginning and everything that was ingrained in him." In response to any questions Andrew may have about being different from his adoptive father and brother, John responds with, "I've always said skin color doesn't matter; it is the character of the person. My family doesn't look at it that way and I don't look at it that way." Both of Peter's sons have a lot of contact with various races in school and when Peter brings them into work with him

because he has a very diverse staff. When asked if he lives in a diverse community now, Peter said no and finished the researcher's question when she said, "do you anticipate that..." and he said, "being a problem? Yes." Peter continued, "the whole concept of integration is really appealing to us. We're also seriously thinking about moving to the city to a specific school district that is really good and really integrated." Regarding the influence this contact has had on the racial and ethnic identity development of the children, Peter said, "I don't know if either one of them are that aware. It is something we talk about on occasion, but they are not developmentally aware of it right now. We are trying to create an atmosphere where they can talk about it and ask questions."

Anticipating bringing the Puerto Rican culture into the boys lives as they get older, Peter said, "I talked to a colleague of mine who said to look into an ethnic Puerto Rican school on Saturdays. They teach culture and heritage and she is so glad she went now that she is an adult . . . so we are definitely going to look into that." Peter also disclosed a sense of guilt about "how we are going to integrate racial and ethnic identity for them . . . just going to the Puerto Rican festival once a year is not going to cut it."

David said that he and his partner have made an effort to expose their children to different culture through their daycare programs and schooling down the road. "There are black, white, Hispanic, and Asian children in their day care classes . . . they're very much exposed to a melting pot of kids." At this point, David does not know how this exposure is going to impact them later in life. "It will be interesting to see how it impacts them. Right now, Kate's best friend at school is black and Luke's is white . . . It'll be interesting to see who they're friends with down the road and who they date." Cindy said that her girls have very little contact with people of the same race and ethnicity as them.

When asked how this impacts them, she said, “I am not really sure. It do not think it bothers Lauren as much as it bothers Abby because Abby came from a much more diverse area before she moved here a couple of months ago.” Being very honest, Cindy said, “the hair scares me and that’s when I wish we had a bigger mixed population so there were places I could go. In that respect I am on my own and that is frustrating to me.” Cindy continued, “I wish I could provide that influence for them, but I am not going to make a false life for them just because [race differences] are there. I think she needs to learn to grow where she is planted. Although, that is one thing that I wish I could change, but we live where we live...if we move, it becomes a racial thing. And do we really want to do that? I don’t want them to feel like they’re not accepted here.”

Real Life Stories

Having biological Caucasian children, adopted Caucasian children, and adopted children of different races and ethnicities, Nancy was able to speak about the differences between raising and caring for Caucasian children as opposed to children of color. Nancy began the interview by saying, “coming from an a small farming town that was pretty much all Caucasian, you really don’t know what you’re missing when you bring a child in of a different race.” She went on to say, “after being with us for a couple of months, Nicole developed what I call dry, white and milky skin. It was called “ash” . . . it is the drying out of a person of color’s skin . . . I was taking care of her like I would my two biological white children . . . I was drying her out. I was doing the worst possible thing for her.” Other participants were asked to give their experiences their children of a different race as well. John was the manager of a group home that Andrew and Tyler lived in before he adopted them. While the manager, Andrew had a difficult time

accepting authority from John because he was white. John said there was a lot ingrained in Andrew's head by his father, who was Black, and Andrew would say, "the white man is going to take [me] away and is the reason [me and my father] are not together anymore." As a management team, composed of people of all races and ethnicities so the children would have people to look up to, would "talk about it . . . we don't look at color...we would say, 'your discipline is not based on skin color and it never will be.'" Now that Andrew is living with John and Tyler, John said, "I can tell you now he's not concerned about race. He used it as a defense to see what we would say and do."

Due to the ages of his children, four and two, Peter has said, "Stephen's skin color is a lot darker than ours and darker than Anthony's actually, so I am sure things will come up in the future about his heritage . . . he knows he is Puerto Rican and he knows he's adopted. More of the questions he has had are, 'where was I before?'" Peter did disclose a story involving his two good friends who adopted a biracial girl and "they were driving in the car and she said something about her skin color not being 'right,' and they pulled over and got in the back seat with her and had a discussion with her."

David said that when "Kate is coloring, she will color a lot of the kids darker skinned more often than not." Overall, because of the stage the children are in developmentally, the "things that go through and three and four-year-olds heads are playing, eating, sleeping, and playing again." Cindy reflects on a time when she and Lauren, who are "joined at the hip," were out shopping and Lauren said, "they're talking about us, up at the register." Cindy said, "yeah, so?" and Lauren responded, "they don't seem very happy about it." Cindy continued, "we are showing them that you can love no matter what." Lauren has had some trouble at school, Cindy said, "she was getting called

the ‘n’ word a lot and we just talk to her and talk to the teachers about it because sometimes they are not pro-active about it and she should not have to hear those things. That’s heartbreaking.” Cindy also said that both girls are not claiming their Black background. “Lauren wants to identify with her mother who is Portuguese and she will say ‘I’m Portuguese,’ which is hard because everyone looks at her and says ‘African-American.’” Similarly with Abby, “she is claiming her Mexican background and is really anticipating that huge party that have at age fifteen, the ‘quinceanera’ . . . but all her friends are white and I said they wouldn’t even know what to do with that party.” Overall, Cindy confesses, “I don’t really think about the race thing a lot, which might be a bad thing. I don’t know.”

Each participant was asked to give advice to future people who choose to adopt transracially. Nancy said, “[adoptive parents] need to know what they’re getting into. They need to be able to defend their children without getting into fights or arguments and they need to be able not to take things personally.” Going along with this statement, Nancy reflects

My son went to kindergarten and the rule was someone has to get the child from the bus . . . I’m standing there waiting for Michael to get off the bus. The bus monitor pulls Michael back and holds him next to her . . . I’m just standing there waiting for Michael to come to me and she’s not letting him go. She’s about to put him back on the bus and I said, ‘excuse me! He shouldn’t be getting back on that bus.’ And she said, ‘well, his mother’s not here.’ And I said, ‘I am his mother.’ You need to be able to take that and not take that personally.

John’s main piece of advice is if they are saying things like “you don’t love me” or are arguing with you constantly, there is a reason for that. John gave an example, which was discussing that Andrew has been grounded for the past couple of weeks and John said there would be constant lying and arguing with Andrew until “one day he just started

bawling and said, ‘the reason why I’m arguing is because every time the police came to take me away from my father, he was always arguing with the social worker and arguing with the police . . . I feel like if I get rid of that way of arguing, I’m going to lose the last piece of my father.’” John also said, “make sure you love your children through the good and the bad because what happens when your child begins to question why you adopted him or why is he a different race than you and it comes to ‘you don’t love me.’ I’ve gotten that before. You need to be able to face that.”

Peter’s advice was

[The racial difference] is an important component of the dynamic, but it is not the most important component . . . what’s most important is that you create a safe, loving environment for your child. It’s not something you can or should ignore. The thing with transracial adoption is . . . there are going to be times when skin color comes up as an issue and you should talk about it with your partner about how you’re going to handle it.

Cindy reflects, “this is the hardest thing I have ever done, but when you hear them say ‘I love you’ it is the most rewarding thing.” Cindy says adopting has been a learning experience, but it has also been really fun. At the end of the interview, Cindy discussed her wishes and concerns. She said

I take the struggles African-Americans have faced very personally now because those are going to be my daughter’s struggles. And I wish I could be of more help to her. That is what I wish. I wish we were in a mixed town so she could have more support . . . I wish I had more time, I wish I were younger, I wish we had a bigger house so I could do it all over again.

Summary and Implications

This study examines the relationship between transracial adoption and racial and ethnic identity development from a parent’s perspective. By listening to stories and hearing experiences of these parents, the writer was able to obtain an idea regarding how the family as a whole views race and how the child expresses his or her differences

within the family context. A review of the literature indicates that transracial adoption is an ongoing debate because of the importance of finding a permanent placement for a child and the potential loss of a cultural heritage by not living with a family of the same race or ethnicity. This study is a qualitative exploratory study. The researcher engaged semi-structured interviews with five families who have adopted transracially. The main findings of this study are that the participants have largely adopted a colorblind approach when raising their children, the children of these participants bring up questions or concerns about being different from their parents, and the exposure to people of the same race or ethnicity of the children varied family to family.

The results of this study suggest that further research can be done regarding the outcomes of transracial adoption. Because this study only interviewed five families, it would be beneficial to expand the number of participants to gain a better understanding of the thoughts and feelings of a larger number of families who have adopted transracially. By looking at the similarities among the five participants, the researcher was able to determine possible trends among the population of parents who have adopted transracially. Further research of a larger population of parents would prove beneficial in order to develop more valid generalizations of parents with transracially adopted children. Additionally, the researcher was only able to interview parents who had young or adolescent children. In the future, it would be beneficial to interview more parents who have grown children in their twenties or thirties. The future researcher would be able to better understand what shaped their ethnic and racial identity development, what would have been done differently, and what impact transracial adoption has had on them in adulthood. In addition to interviewing a larger number of parents, it would be beneficial

to generate interview questions for the children as well. By interviewing the transracially adopted children, the future researcher would be able to understand what their needs and desires are. The interviews would be conducted without the presence of the parents, the answers would remain confidential, and the future researcher would be able to determine what kind of trainings or support groups could occur in the social work field for parents looking to adopt transracially.

In addition to interviewing a larger span of families and children in future research, it would be beneficial to examine the range of what these five participants said in their interviews and generate a questionnaire in order to survey more people. The questionnaire would have both Likert scale and open response questions, so the participants would have the opportunity to express personal thoughts, feelings, and go into more depth on certain issues. Although there is important information derived from this study, a more in depth and larger study involving more participants with older children would be equally beneficial because it would give the future researchers better evidence upon which to formulate what we should do next in terms of policy and practice.

An implication derived from this study for social work practice is the importance of trainings for families who are in the process of adopting a child of a different race or ethnicity. People adopting children of a different race should receive the standard training from the state child welfare agency, but once a child of a different race or ethnicity is placed with that family, the researcher believes that the family should receive adequate training about the importance of being cognizant of color and being open to discussion with the child about his or her racial and ethnic identity. The trainings could

include speakers who have raised children of a different race or ethnicity and their experiences with their children and how they have handled certain situations. The trainings can provide a dual service of giving the participants an opportunity to network with each other and establish connections and bonds with one another, which enables the participants to reach out to each other in times of need.

In addition to trainings, it would be beneficial to establish support groups for families involved in transracial adoption. One participant, Cindy, reflects that one support group she was involved in helped her get through the toughest of times with her first adopted daughter. A support group for parents who have adopted transracially will allow them to vent and share positive and negative experiences with others who are going through similar situations. There are problems and issues that emerge within transracially adopted households surrounding racial and ethnic identity development and the level of exposure to their native race or ethnic group. A support group would allow the participants to establish a bond and potential friendship with other members so the support would extend beyond the meeting time.

It would also be important to determine if it would be appropriate to hire a transracial adoption support worker in the state child welfare department that specializes in transitioning a child into the adoptive home. That worker would be available for ongoing support, be available to make home visits, and make references for a child to enter counseling if needed. Eventually, if this support worker was able to make a positive difference in the lives of transracial adoptive families, there could be movement to make a small department in the adoption unit of the state department that specializes in transracial adoption support. With a more in depth research study involving a wider

range of participants, the transracially adopted children, or a questionnaire in order to encompass more participants, future researchers will be able to determine more of the needs and desires of the transracial adoptive families, including both parents and children.

References

- Carter-Black, J. (2002). Transracial adoption and foster care placement: Worker perception and attitude. *Child Welfare League of America, 81*, 337-370.
- Haymes, M. V., & Simon, S. (2003). Transracial adoption: Families identify issues and needed support services. *Child Welfare League of America, 82*, 251-272.
- Heimsoth, D., & Laser, J. A. (2008). Transracial adoption: Expatriate parents living in China with their adopted Chinese children. *International Social Work, 51*, 651-668.
- Hollingsworth, L. (1997). Effect of transracial/transethnic adoption on children's racial and ethnic identity and self-esteem. *Marriage & Family Review, 25*, 99-130.
- Jennings, P. K. (2006). The trouble with the multiethnic placement act: An empirical look at transracial adoption. *Sociological Perspectives, 49*, 559-581.
- Kim, G. S., Suyemoto, K. L., & Turner, C. B. (2010). Sense of belonging, sense of exclusion, and racial and ethnic identities in Korean transracial adoptees. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 16*, 179-190.
- Padilla, J. B., Vargas, J. H., & Chavez, H. L. (2010). Influence of age on transracial foster adoptions and its relation to ethnic identity development. *Adoption Quarterly, 13*, 50-73.
- Samuels, G. M. (2010). Building kinship and community: Relational processes of bicultural identity among adult multiracial adoptees. *Family Process, 49*, 26-42.
- Silverman, A. R. (1993). Outcomes of transracial adoption. *The Future of Children, 3*, 104-118.
- Smith, J. F. (1996). Analyzing ethical conflict in the transracial adoption debate: Three conflicts involving community. *Hypatia, 11*, 1-33.
- Swize, J. (2002). Transracial adoption and the unblinkable difference: Racial dissimilarity serving the interests of adopted children. *Virginia Law Review, 88*, 1079-1118.

Appendix A

I will begin the interview with a “disclaimer” about how the goal of this research study is to provide parents of transracially adopted children with information on what works best when raising adopted children of a different race. This interview should be viewed as a “wisdom survey” because who would “know how” better than parents who have parented/are parenting children of a different race or ethnicity.

The following are questions that I want to have answered at some point during the interview. They do not have to be answered in this order.

- 1) Ask them to divide the child’s life into a few “chapters.” For each chapter, tell a story about the child. Then I will ask how racial identity development was involved (or not) in the chapter.
- 2) What kind of contact does your child have with people of his/her ethnic background or culture?
- 3) How has this contact influenced or affected the child’s racial/ethnic identity development?
- 4) How is the fact that the child was adopted transracially ever brought up within the home? Who brings it up?
- 5) Who has been influential in helping you raise your children?
- 6) If you have to start over again or are giving advice to new parents adopting children of a different race, what would you say?

Appendix B

Dear Participant,

My name is Ashley Chuha and I am a senior at Providence College. This study is for my senior thesis and involves research. I am conducting a study on transracial adoption and racial and ethnic identity development from a parent's perspective. The purpose of this study is to gather information about parenting children who have been transracially adopted in order to provide wisdom to those who are doing it or planning on doing it in the future.

This should be considered a "wisdom survey" because as the participant, you are providing me with your knowledge and experience of raising transracially adopted children. You were selected as a participant because you have a transracially adopted child. The length of this interview will vary, but I anticipate the interview will take between thirty and fifty minutes. Your role in this research is to answer the questions I ask you in order to benefit this research study.

There are possible risks associated with involvement in this research, such as emotional discomfort when discussing your child's development. Some questions may trigger some negative or uncomfortable emotions.

Positively, by participating in this research you are able to provide your knowledge and expertise on parenting adopted children of a different race. The information you are providing will serve as a guide to other people interested in parenting children of a different race or ethnicity than their own. Compensation will not be provided for participation in this study.

Confidentiality can be reasonably provided in this research. Only my advisor and I will have access to the data collected during this interview. There will be no identifying information shared in the finished version of my thesis. All data, such as the notes and tapes, will be kept locked for a period of three years as required by federal guidelines.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw from this study during or after the study without penalty. You have up to a week after this interview is conducted to withdraw from the study. If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please e-mail me at achuha@friars.providence.edu.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

Signature

Date

Thank you for your participation.