RESEARCHING THE ROLE OF RACE IN YOUNG BIRACIAL ADULTS' IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION; EXPLORING IMPLICATIONS FOR TRANS-RACIAL ADOPTIONS

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INTRODUCTION

This article draws on the insights of research on nine Indian-White biracial young adults, and applies those insights to the transracial adoption debate. It thus does not report research on transracial adoption directly, but enters the debate on transracial adoption through using insights on the process of racial identity construction that challenge some assumptions prominent in the debate.

In some ways transracial adoption parallels biracial identity construction. The identity construction of both biracial individuals and transracial adoptees raises difficult questions on the role of race. For both groups racial identity construction is a complex process. Findings from this study include the parallels between transracial adoptees and biracial individuals. They show that influences on racial identity are more complex than parental racial identities. They include location, school, relations with extended family, friends, dates, interconnections with other social identities as well as media and societal attitudes to race.

This study also challenges as a misconception the idea that unless White foster parents are carefully trained, "they cannot provide Black children with the skills and survival techniques they need for coping in a racist society" (Small, 1986:92).

This article is structured in four parts. Part one is concerned with a discussion on the terms "race", "transracial" and "biracial". In part two I provide an overview of the literature on transracial adoption and children of mixed parentage. The research strategy I used to collect data from the nine biracial young adults is outlined, and constitutes part three. The discussion of emergent themes follows in part four.

RACE, TRANSRACIAL AND BIRACIAL

Most South Africans describe their race in terms of the fixed racial categories which were legislatively assigned in the apartheid era, namely, African, Indian, White and Coloured (Posel, 2001; Singh, 1997; Zegeye, 2001). These racialised identities are deeply embedded in the South African social structure and remain part of the nomenclature of the post-apartheid system (McMillan, 2003; Posel, 2001).

The term "biracial" is used in the USA to refer to people who have parents from two socially defined races. In South Africa Blankenberg (2000), Morral (1994), Ledderboge (1996) and Maré (2005) have used "biracial" to refer to children of interracial unions. The term biracial, however, is perplexing, because it implies that an individual has two halves. I am not suggesting that an individual can be divided into halves or can fall "in the middle" between two identities. Nor am I suggesting that there are Black and White races and that there is a space between these called biracial. "Biracial" is a category of race just as Coloured, African, Chinese and Indian are constructed. Given the myriad possible combinations of different racial groups, the "biracial" category is indeed diverse and can comprise Indian-African, White-African, Chinese-Indian and so on, and thus differs significantly in terms of appearance, cultural practices and life experiences (Wijeyesinghe, 1992).

Transracial adoption, also known as cross-racial adoption, refers to the adoption of children of one racial background by families of another racial background.

I understand that to talk about race, racial categories, such as interracial, biracial and cross racial is to use terms and habits of thought inherited from the very race science that was used to justify oppression and marginalisation (Erasmus, 2001). It is always difficult to talk about what is essentially a flawed and problematic social construct without using language that is itself problematic (Tatum, 1997). In this article race is used as a social construct and not as indicator of absolute, pure strains of genetic material or physical characteristics. Also, while I will make reference to racial categories such as Indian and White, this should not lend legitimacy or credibility to the many popular cultural stereotypes and caricatures that accompany these descriptors. Using the categories allows me an opportunity to draw on a study of a select group of young adults to establish how they make sense of, and communicate about, the existence of the idea of race and racial identity, noting and reflecting on the possibility that my use of the terms, and the ways of thinking that accompany them, may influence my research methodology and analysis. South African research on interracial relationships (Morral, 1994; Ratele, 2002) and transracial adoptions (Ledderboge, 1996; Miller, 1999) have explored, albeit indirectly, the notion of biracialism. Morral (1994), Miller (1999) and Ratele (2002), reported, on the basis of participant responses, in their research studies that there is a perception that children of interracial unions will be born into a racial netherworld or marginal situation.

LITERATURE

Transracial adoption, adoption of children of one racial background by families of another racial background, has been met with much controversy in both South Africa and abroad (McRoy, Zurcher, Lauderdale & Anderson, 1982; Miller, 1999; Ledderboge, 1996; Ishizawa, Kenney, Kubo & Stevens, 2006). Miller (1999:66), for example, asks:

> "Can a White family in a racist society provide an environment which would allow a Black child to form a healthy racial and ethnic identity and grow up into a well-adjusted adult?"

Small (1986:92), on the basis of case studies conducted in Britain of Black children in the care of White foster parents, suggests that unless White foster families are carefully trained, "they cannot provide Black children with the skills and survival techniques they need for coping in a racist society". He argues that transracial adoptees experience a "low self-esteem" and "will not only be rejected by White people but also by Black people, for not being Black enough in attitude" (Small, 1986:92). Similarly, Maxime (1986) notes that Black children growing up in White families in Britain fail to develop a positive Black identity – "They suffer identity confusion and develop a negative self-concept, believing or wishing that they were White and harbouring negative attitudes towards Black people" (Maxime 1986:110). This trope is continued by Scott (1996), who argues in her article "Adoption: A Black and White Affair", featured in the *South African Cosmopolitan,* that transracial adoptees "suffer from a loss of cultural and racial identity". Scott argues, without any empirical evidence, that the placement of Black children in White homes "not only isolates a child from his or her contemporaries" but also makes them "more vulnerable to racism". Scott (1996:27) adopts the view that White families cannot provide transracially adopted young people with the "survival skills" that are needed in an essentially racist South African society.

Miller (1999), in her Masters thesis: "What perceptions of cross-racial adoption reveal about notions of race, culture and identity", reveals the perceptions of young White South Africans with issues of race, culture and identity, in the context of thinking about cross racial adoption. Themes

that emerged in her qualitative study included participant perceptions of cross-racial adoption and mixed race relationships. When the 20 participants in Miller's study were asked their views on cross-racial adoption, six were supportive of the idea. Only one of the six participants suggested that she would adopt cross-racially, although she acknowledged "that there would be problems". The participant explains: "A Black child will battle growing up in a White home because that requires him denying his culture…" A further three participants shared this view and explained that the transracially adopted child will "experience a loss of cultural identity". The 14 participants who were against cross-racial adoption cited similar reasons: "He will have an identity crisis as he will instinctively be drawn to his Black culture and be confused about who he is", and "how is that child supposed to place itself in terms of its own identity[?] …Adopting cross-racially denies your heritage and results in a loss of identity…" (Miller, 1999:172-173).

When participants were asked to explore their perceptions of mixed race relationships, seven of the 20 participants "accepted the idea of mixed race relationships". While none of the seven participants mentioned "possible problems relating to the racial and cultural differences that may exist" they did state that "mixed race relationships were generally frowned upon by society" and "was still considered an oddity". One respondent, although in support of mixed race relationships, commented "the thought of it just does not appeal to me" (Miller, 1999:170). Thirteen of the participants in Miller's (1999:170) study were completely against the thought of mixed race relationships. Three attributed personal reasons, six thought that people involved in interracial relationships were seeking attention as "it was considered the in thing", and four cited religious reasons – "God never intended for race groups to mix in that way…if He did, then we wouldn't have been born different." The same ten participants, equally male and female, opposed interracial relationships because they believed that:

> "A child born to a mixed race couple wouldn't know what they were (participant four), as children are thought to look to their parents for a sense of who they are, for a sense of identity and belonging (participant eight). Participant nine explains: that a child would be neither Black nor White, how is he supposed to find his place in the world when he can't even identify with his own parents…how can you expect that child to grow up well adjusted when they have no sense of who they are or where they belong?" (Miller 1999:170-171).

Miller's (1999) study essentially highlights two main points. Firstly, it reflects the social context and perceptions of a racialised South Africa, where "your identity is confirmed as being either Black or White", and secondly, there is a belief that cross-racial adoptees and biracial children will be born into a racial netherworld, destined to be confused, unstable, maladjusted and perpetual victims of a racially polarised society (Ratele, 2002:371-406). There are at least two possible implied positions in the last point – the one is that their biological status of "race mix" leads to problems; and the other is that society will make it problematic for the child.

A different perspective emerges from the findings of Ledderboge's Masters dissertation, "Transracial Placements of Children in the Durban Metropolitan Area", this time through interviews with adoptive parents themselves. Ledderboge (1996) utilised an interview and case study approach to generate both quantitative and qualitative data in describing and evaluating the practice of transracial placements over a four-year period. The interview questionnaire concentrated on the parents' subjective experience and assessment, and not the children who were the focus of the study. Case vignettes were included as a form of "balancing the one sidedness".

The findings from Ledderboge's (1996) study reveal that the transracial children "had caught up with developmental delays, their health improved greatly, they acquired emotional security and progressed intellectually", compared to their situation at the time of adoption. Based on her

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findings, the researcher identified key factors that influenced the development of a positive racial identity in cross-racial adoptees. These factors included the meaningful interaction between the children with "persons of various races, including their own", the children having "racially and culturally compatible role models", attending "mixed race schools", and living in "mixed residential areas". Although the findings regarding the children's racial identity formation can only be tentative, Ledderboge (1996:155) reports that the children "described themselves correctly in terms of racial identity" and "their positive development was apt to alleviate anxieties of ethnic or cultural alienation." Ledderboge (1996:152) concludes that the transracial child "can establish a positive self-identity and comfortably move between cultures". Ledderboge's findings challenge the assumptions that transracially adopted children will struggle with their racial identities and cultural identification.

Similar findings emerged from an American study conducted by McRoy *et al.* (1982). Two groups of families were compared in the study: a group of 30 White families who had adopted Black children, and a group of 30 Black families who had adopted Black children. The research questions explored were: "Do differences exist between the self-esteem of Black children who have been adopted by White families and that of Black children who have been adopted by Black families?" and "Are the perceptions of racial identity of Black children raised in Black families different from those of Black children raised in White families?" (McRoy *et al.*, 1982:522). McRoy *et al.* (1982:522) concluded that no significant differences were found in the self-esteem scores and self worth reports of the two groups of adolescents. The findings from the study by McRoy *et al.* (1982) indicate that transracially adopted children are likely to have as high a self-esteem and sense of self-worth, to be closely attached to their parents, perform well at school, and have no psychological problems when compared to other adopted children. McRoy *et al.* (1982:526) also suggest that factors such as the transracial families' "nurturance of the child's Black identity, the child's access to Black role models and peers in the community and in school, and the parents' attention to the child's Black heritage seemed to be influential in the shaping of a positive racial identity".

In reporting their findings both Ledderboge (1996) and McCoy *et al.* (1982) conclude that the transracially adopted children have developed positive racial identities. However, neither explains what constitutes a positive racial identity, how positive racial identity is measured, and why a positive racial identity is necessary. What is significant about the studies by Ledderboge and McRoy *et al.* is that the factors they identify as being important in relation to racial identity in transracial adoptees are also identified by researchers examining the identity development of biracial children (Wilson, 1987; Gibbs & Hines, 1992; Francis, 2005).

And so many assumptions are made about biracial individuals and cross-racial adoptees without any reference to what they think, feel and experience. It is impossible to draw any clear conclusions from these assumptions, because none of them take into account how biracial individuals and cross-racial adoptees experience their life worlds. I believe that this is where my exploratory study adds to the small body of South African literature on this topic. By drawing on an empirical study of nine Indian-White biracial young adults, I explore what implications and parallels there are for the transracial adoption debate.

RESEARCH STRATEGY

I used the life story method of data collection in line with my view of social identity as a resource that people draw on in constructing their personal narratives, which provide meaning and a sense of continuity to their lives. I assumed that by asking the participants to tell me stories of their lives I would gain access to how biracial young adults interpret their social world and what they

believe about themselves. I chose to adopt the short life story approach (Plummer, 2001) as it requires less time than long life stories, tends to be more focused and allows for a series of autobiographical presentations.

In the selection of participants I used the following criteria (Table 1). Firstly, participants had to have biological membership in a family where one parent was identified as Indian and the other parent was identified as White. The Population Registration Act, Act 30 of 1950 formed the basis of the National Party's policy of "separate development". It imposed a specific racial grouping and therefore a formal identity on an individual, effectively shaping their life-story through this classification (Reddy, 2001:74). As the Population Registration Act was repealed only in 1991, parents of the 18- to 21-year-old biracial participants would have been racially classified in terms of this Act. Secondly, participants were young adults. I specifically chose participants who were between 18 and 21 years of age because, as a researcher, I assumed that I would be able to gather sufficient life experience from this age group compared to using a younger adolescent sample. This is also a critical period for the selected participants, as they would have just emerged from the norms of the school system and would now have plans and choices for mapping out their futures. They would perceive themselves as agents in the social world.

Table 1 shows the criteria used in the selection of participants: (i) biological membership in a family where one parent was identified as Indian and the other parent was identified as White; and (ii) young adults between 18 and 21 years of age. A non-probability sampling technique - snowball sampling – was used. Interracial families and biracial young adults were identified through schools, universities, and religious, sporting and social service organisations in the Durban Ethekweni area.

TABLE 1
SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANTS

NAME*	GEN-DER	AGE	CLASS**	RACE*** OF MOTHER	RACE*** OF FATHER	PLACE OF RESIDENCE
1 Kerry Guy	Female	18	Working Class	Indian	White	Albert Park/ Bluff
2. Ishmael Vally	Male	21	Upper Middle Class		Indian	Clairwood/ Glenwood
3. Natalie Kumar	Female	21	Upper Middle Class		Indian	Glenwood
4. Dayallan Naicker	Male	21	Working Class		Indian	Clairwood/ Phoenix
5. Mayuri Breschi	Female	19	Upper Middle Class	Indian	White	Durban North
6. Daniel Kearney	Male	21	Upper Middle Class	Indian	White	Sarnia/ Westville
7. Prashantha Burn	Female	20	Middle Class	Indian	White	Reservoir Hills/ Redhill
8. Marlon Govender	Male	20	Working Class	Indian	White	Phoenix
9. Nicole Lyons	Female	20	Working Class	Indian	White	Albert Park/ Rossburgh

*   All names of the participants, references to places and people have been changed for the sake of confidentiality

**   According to participant

***   According to Population Registration Act

In analysing the life histories the purpose was to expand, refine, develop and illuminate a theoretical understanding of how nine Indian-White biracial young adults interpret their social

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reality, especially with regard to their experience of racial identity. The analysis involved a cross-case analysis for the purpose of theorising from experiences drawn from the in-depth interviews, theoretical framework and literature. Measures of trustworthiness were applied in terms of credibility (truth value), transferability (applicability), dependability (consistency) and confirmability (neutrality) (Krefting, 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

DISCUSSION

Although this study does not concern itself specifically with the issue of transracial adoption, I believe that the findings of this study do have two implications for the transracial adoption debate. Firstly, it challenges Maxime's (1986:110) argument, reported above, that Black children growing up in White families "suffer identity confusion" which results in "negative attitudes towards Black people". This gives a central role to the existing racial identities of parents, and what they communicate about race to the children, and errs in giving too little weight to other factors affecting identity, and in assuming that the family is the sole contributor to racial identity construction in children. Secondly, the findings indicate that influences on racial identity are broader than the family and include location, school, relations with extended family, friends, dates and interconnections with other social identities, as well as media and societal attitudes to race. An implication is thus that the role of parents is less in the provision of a racial identity, and more in the quality of support that enables young people to deal with the many influences on identity.

Also, while Maxime (1986) argues that the experiences of Black children growing up in White families are of a deficit nature, all of the participants in my study have constructed their personal narratives around discourses of advantage in their situation. Kerry's situation was one which could be envied by others. She felt that being half Indian, half White gave her a kind of unique attractiveness that other girls did not have:

> I remember once in Standard 7, when we had an "Eastern Extravaganza", I wore a Punjabi [traditional Indian dress] and everything and ended up being the first princess. The Indian girls looked at me and talked to each other, because I looked so good in the outfit I was wearing. I think they were jealous.

Natalie also stated that she thought she was beautiful and that this put her at an advantage over boys, because they wanted to go out with her, and girls, because they wanted to look like her. She also sees her looks as positive, because no one can define her or box her. She recalled a situation where she was sitting in a café with her friends and a woman came up to her and told her she "looked like the UN". She saw this as a compliment and as giving her freedom from having to fit into a racial category.

Daniel, Prashantha, Kerry and Natalie also found that being part of two different groups helped them understand both points of view. This was often used as a mediating point or in bridging the gap between the racial groups at school and freed them in a way that the other children could not experience. Mayuri remembers an incident where her White friends did not want to attend an Indian girl's party because she lived in an Indian area, which they perceived as dangerous. She managed to challenge these stereotypes and could make them see the situation from a different angle, which resulted in their attending her party together.

For Daniel, being half Indian, half White proved advantageous, especially when it came to finding a date for his matric dance. He told his classmates, "I've got a passport to do whatever I want - I could go White, I could go Indian - it's a privilege." Being biracial also allowed him access into two worlds, something which he described as "like a pendulum, you can swing

between the two extremes." This placed the participants in a position where they had access to not just the Indian and the White group, but a number of different racial groups. For example, Daniel and Prashantha both described how at breaks they could move between the different groups. The point here is that such wider social acceptance is important to teenagers, with the general insecurities that often accompany this age. Daniel explains:

> I remember how at break times, we used to have almost like a "Group Areas Act" happening because there would be an area where all the Indians would sit, an area for the Black group and then there would be an area where the White group would sit. I could mix between them.

This he also saw as having a positive effect on his fellow students, as he says, "Maybe it was good that people could see me moving around and realize that you didn't have to stick to any particular race group."

Some of the participants did speak of a certain amount of confusion, but these in no way overshadowed their generally positive outlook about their identities. The confusion the participants spoke of only operated at a superficial level when their identity was problematised by external sources, such as when classmates and officials attempted to lock them into rigid racial identities such as by asking "What are you?"

What the participants' stories bring into focus is that the participants see their biracial identity as something positive and not as something, which burdens them. Perhaps a connection here can be made to McNay's (1994) point that the labelling of certain groups of individuals as marginal provides those groups with a coherent identity from which resistant counter-identities may be formulated – for instance the idea of "queer" politics. As Nicole shows:

> I have half of each race in me. I am happy with that mix: I am blessed with the better of two beautiful worlds. I am not cursed, I am blessed…I would not have had my situation any different.

Secondly, Small (1986:92) suggests that unless White foster parents are carefully trained, "they cannot provide Black children with the skills and survival techniques they need for coping in a racist society". It is not apparent what the "skills and survival techniques" are, but Small assumes that children will share their experiences of racism with parents and/or seek their assistance. In my study only Kerry recalled talking to her Indian mother about her experiences of racism, as she believed her mother would have a greater sense of empathy. However, she did not describe any strategy or survival skill that she received from her mother to deal with the situation. The other eight participants did not recall relating their experiences of racism to their parents and none described their parents, whether Indian or White, as initiating a conversation with regards to dealing with racism. The point here is that, while Small (1986) suggests that White parents should be trained with "skill and survival techniques", he assumes that children will communicate about issues of race and racism with their parents. The participants, as we shall see in the next section, spoke to people other than their parents and devised their own strategies to deal with racism.

Dayallan learned positive ways of seeing race and dealing with racism from his grandfather. He remembers coming home from school upset because the other children told him he wasn't Indian and his grandfather making him feel better:

> He said that we are all one race; and that god made all people in this world and whether you were White or Brown or Black it did not matter. All that mattered was what colour your heart was.

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This helped him see the good in people, beyond the colour of their skin, and not to allow racist remarks to deter him. This helped him in high school to deal with the racist name-calling by a fellow athlete. Dayallan also used his unique family situation to get his classmates to talk about race. He chose the topic *What it is like to be part of a multicultural family?* as the topic of his oral in matric. The discussions after he had finished helped him dispel the myths that some of his classmates harboured about biracial children. He saw this as an opportunity to challenge stereotypes and be open about his family:

> Of course there will be interracial families that will have problems, but so do same race families. Like most families, my parents have taught my sister and I good values, spiritual lessons, and how to be good people.

Dayallan acknowledged that having parents who came from different cultures gave him different ways of knowing and understanding the world. What his narrative brings to the fore is that interracial families can transcend race by unifying people through love, respect, and common humanity.

Most of the participants mentioned their irritation at continuously having to answer the question, "What are you?" Mayuri found that by challenging people about the question and asking them to clarify it, it became more obvious that fitting into a racial category was not the only defining point to a person. A certain amount of humour was also present when the participants described people's frustrations and efforts to classify them. For example, Prashantha mentioned how amusing she found confusing people by answering, "I'm half Scottish and half Tamil."

Nicole also found humour as being a good way of dealing with her classmates' continuous need to know her race:

> At school everyone's asking us, "What are you?" It's like every time you say, "No my mother's Indian and my father's White." And they like still, "So what are you?" So I would say, "I'm White." And they say, "You can't be White." And I would say, "No really, we are tanned Whites…the sun tanned me. I am a really tanned White person." I think most were convinced. I even remember some of them saying, "I wish I was as tanned as you…it's so unfair that you tan so easily." And I would say, "Oh, it's just natural."

CONCLUSION

This study has given voice to nine Indian-White biracial young adults. In many ways all nine challenge the commonly held assumptions, evidenced in the literature reviewed, that biracial individuals and transracial adoptees will be confused, unstable, maladjusted and perpetual victims of a racially polarised society. The findings from this study challenge the argument that black children growing up in White families suffer identity confusion. The findings also point out that influences on racial identity are broader than the family and include location, school, relations with extended family, friends, dates and interconnections with other social identities, as well as media and societal attitudes to race. Finally, this study confronts the misconception that unless White foster parents are "carefully trained", they cannot provide Black children with the skills they need for coping in a racist society.

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