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### **Beyond the Controversy: An Exploration of Cultural Socialization Behaviors in Transracial Adoptive Families**

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BEYOND THE CONTROVERSY: AN EXPLORATION OF CULTURAL  
SOCIALIZATION BEHAVIORS IN TRANSRACIAL ADOPTIVE FAMILIES

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of  
Antioch University New England

In Partial fulfillment for the degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

by

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August 2022

BEYOND THE CONTROVERSY: AN EXPLORATION OF CULTURAL  
SOCIALIZATION BEHAVIORS IN TRANSRACIAL ADOPTIVE FAMILIES

This dissertation, by Karmen R. Smith, has  
been approved by the committee members signed below  
who recommend that it be accepted by the faculty of  
Antioch University New England  
in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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BEYOND THE CONTROVERSY: AN EXPLORATION OF CULTURAL  
SOCIALIZATION BEHAVIORS IN TRANSRACIAL ADOPTIVE FAMILIES

**ABSTRACT**

The voices of the families that have successfully raised transracially adopted children with a positive cultural identity are missing from the literature: “Further research is needed on adoption from the perspective of the adoptee” (Clark et al., 2006, p. 192). There are methodological shortcomings that inhibit our ability to definitively determine adjustment outcomes for this population. Such shortcomings, combined with a failure to address additional variables that influence outcomes, have left identified gaps in the research unaddressed. The purpose of this grounded theory study is to identify the cultural socialization behaviors that contributed to the development of the participant’s positive bicultural identity. Data was collected from 3 African American transracial adoptees. Six themes on the experience of transracial adoption and the development of a positive bicultural identity emerged from the data: Representation Matters; Put Up or Shut Up; They Ain’t Ready; We All Family Here; We are the Bridge, and Stuck Between Two Worlds; Part of Both, Claimed by Neither. Additionally, the presence of these 6 themes appears to be describing an integrated and reciprocally recursive process of development towards a positive bicultural identity, with connections to critical areas of cultural competence for transracial adoptive parenting. The reported socialization behaviors that serve as manifestations of racial awareness, multicultural planning, and survival skills and contributions to the emergent themes are presented in the following constructed themes: Ancillary Supports, Extracurricular Activities, Open Dialogue, Application of Cultural Awareness in Parenting, and Literature and Films.

*Keywords:* transracial adoption, cultural socialization, identity development, bicultural, parenting



## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Family research is shifting towards identifying supports for families to thrive, rather than focusing on dysfunction or pathology (Walsh, 2012). Ethnic identity, how one defines or characterizes themselves in terms of group membership, is an important component when assessing levels of adjustment and psychological well-being (Ferrari, Ranieri et al., 2015). A review of the literature surrounding transracial adoption supports the importance of fostering the continual development of a cultural identity within the child that honors both the adoptive and birth families (Heiden-Rootes, 2014; Johnson, 2002; Lancaster & Nelson, 2009; Lifton, 2010; Verrier, 1993; Vonk et al., 2010). However, there is little research on what factors are needed in establishing and fostering cultural identity. What is the process? What external factors contributed to the development of a positive bicultural identity? More specifically, how do Caucasian families utilize cultural socialization behaviors to promote a positive bicultural identity within their transracially adopted African American children?

The voices of the families that have raised transracially adopted children with a positive cultural identity are missing from the literature: “Further research is needed on adoption from the perspective of the adoptee” (Clark et al., 2006, p. 192). There are few qualitative studies that involve the voices of transracial adoptees; however, when these voices are acknowledged, the adoptees report challenges with fitting in with their own family settings, their peers, and the outside community (Freundlich & Lieberthal, 2000; John, 2002; Trenka et al., 2006; Simon & Alstein, 2002). Additionally, helping professionals assisting these families have no framework to support parents in their efforts to raise their children into bicultural-adoptive adults with a positive sense of self and good psychological well-being. The aim of this study is to examine and identify the cultural socialization behaviors that promote a positive bicultural identity in

transracially adopted African American children. Traditional assessment scales often fail to capture the different experiences, behaviors, and meanings associated with bicultural identity development. Therefore, the implementation of a mixed methods approach is helpful in addressing the gap created by the limited capability of the assessment scales and in giving voice to the families with transracially adopted children. By combining qualitative and quantitative methods of inquiry, I am able to empirically identify transracially adopted individuals with positive bicultural identities, explore how each individual experiences their process of identity formation, and then use the collected information to provide marriage and family therapists with a unified theoretical explanation on how to integrate cultural socialization behaviors into child rearing practices.

Participants included Caucasian families with African American transracial-adoptive adults, ages 20 – 35, who are defined as having a positive cultural identity and overall good psychological well-being. I quantitatively operationalized this definition by administering the Multicultural Identity Integration Scale (MULTIIS; Yampolsky et al., 2016) to measure bicultural identity integration and the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale IV (FACES IV; Olson, 2011) to measure family functioning, family communication, and family satisfaction. I used the Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Personal Growth, and Self-Acceptance subscales from the Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWB; Ryff & Keyes, 1995) to assess the well-being of the participants. The MULTIIS is based on the Cognitive-Developmental Model of Social Identity Integration (CDSMII) and grounded in the developmental, social cognition, and cultural psychology literatures (Yampolsky et al. 2016). FACES IV is grounded in the Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems (Circumplex Model; Olson, 2011) and the PWB is theoretically grounded in the humanistic and

developmental sciences (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Once I determined that a participant met the stated definition, I invited the individual and her/his/their family to participate in a semi-structured interview exploring their lived experiences. The family's perspective aided in understanding how transracial adoptive parents are connecting with their children about race and culture. I intend to use the findings from this study to provide a unified theoretical explanation on how to integrate cultural socialization behaviors into child rearing practices (Charmaz, 2006).

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Adoption connects the adopted child, birth family, and adoptive family into a lifelong triad of emotional and behavioral interactions within the family system. Race is a construct, a societal invention that continues to exist in today's interactions because there is at least one person involved who engages in racial thinking (Bashi Treitler, 2014). This socially constructed system "links culture with phenotype in order to create a systematic and stratified scale of human deservedness" (Bashi Treitler, 2014, p. 2). The insidious threads of racial thinking shape our social interactions and influence the practices and policies that regulate family formation and adoption (Bashi Treitler, 2014). Racism is the combination of racial prejudice by the dominant group that maintains the systemic, historical, and collective power to implement practices that privileges some while depriving others (Rodriguez & Davenport, 2017).

According to Coakley and Orme (2006), past research on transcultural placements contains methodological shortcomings that inhibit our ability to definitively determine adjustment outcomes for this population. Such shortcomings, combined with a failure to address additional variables that influence outcomes, have left identified gaps in the research unaddressed. Additionally, while Simon et al. (1994) report no difference between transracial adoption (TRA) and interracial adoption (IRA) when measuring racial attitudes, racial awareness, and racial identity, many TRA participants suggested that Caucasian parents be sensitive to racial issues when considering adopting transracially. This suggestion for racial sensitivity speaks to the importance of parents' willingness to acknowledge and confront the existence of racism. The strength of this willingness falls on the racial continuum, somewhere between the anchors of colorblindness and race awareness (Bashi Treitler, 2014). By educating these parents, helping professionals are providing an opportunity for change that will spread to

other areas of their lives. This is one of the ways we, as a profession, can promote and support social change.

There are many taxonomies pertaining to identity formation (Berry, 1989; Erickson, 1959; Phinney, 1990); however, there is little information on how individuals socialize their transracially-adopted children and how this socialization influences the child's process of identity formation. Bicultural identity integration is the degree to which individuals perceive their mainstream and ethnic identities as compatible rather than oppositional and difficult to integrate (Benet-Martínez et al., 2002). For me, bicultural also means “walking in two worlds”, the world of birth culture and the world of the adoptive family’s culture. Benet-Martínez and Haritatos (2005) reviewed over 40 years of psychological literature on biculturalism and found only 20 empirical studies related to this topic. Hughes et al. (2011) describe racial socialization, a component of bicultural identity formation, as a “transactional process in which parents, peers, and society impart race-related messages to children, while children select, interpret, and integrate racial messages into their burgeoning sense of self” (p. 98). According to scholars, this process of socialization is a developmental task, not a choice (Baden, 2015). Meaning, parents cannot opt out of providing developmentally appropriate racial socialization opportunities for their children. Given the importance of identity integration and racial socialization, the paltry number of empirical studies on this topic further demonstrates the gap not only in the writings on bicultural identity formation, but also in the marriage and family therapy literature.

The National Conference of Adoption 1955 offered by the Child Welfare League, reoriented the practice of adoption toward *the best interest of the child* (Social Welfare History Archives, 2013). Lawmakers and helping professionals often consider the best interest of the child when evaluating transracial adoptions. However, the best interest of the child is a specious



definition that is further distorted by the individual lawmaker's views on the centrality of race and its role in the adoption decision-making process. When attempting to define the best interest of the child, it seems more prudent to include examinations of the parents' racial and cultural competence levels, along with their socialization practices from the adoptees' perspective, rather than focusing on the race of the adoptive parents. The time has come to hear from transracial adoptees about their familial relationships and their parents' performance of racial and cultural socialization.

My desire to effect change by addressing social justice issues in our society is an acknowledged description of the secondary gains inherent to the implementation of this research study. It is my intent to establish myself as a researcher committed to issues of social justice, advocacy, and the equality of human rights, while also presenting multiple viewpoints on how these aspects reflect the emergent nature of reality. I also acknowledge that there are subjective values and judgements inherent to the construct of positive ethnic identity. The purpose of this study is to develop a theoretical framework for marriage and family therapists working with transracial adoptive families, not to further engage in the controversy surrounding transracial adoption. The following sections offer a review of adoption, transracial adoption and the surrounding controversy, bicultural identity, socialization, relevant theoretical frameworks, and the call for competent therapists.

## **Adoption**

The international system of adoption is the transfer of children, often from impoverished or disenfranchised parents to middle-class or wealthy mothers and fathers (Briggs, 2012). These adoptions can be open, meaning information and contact is shared between the birth and adoptive families, or closed, where the birth family is denied future contact with the child and

loses all rights to information regarding the child's well-being. The definition of the term adoption can refer to a personal act, a legal process, or a social service (Zamostny et al., 2003). The personal act of adoption is now considered a lifelong process that involves three entities, known collectively as the adoption triad: the adoptee, the birth family, and the adoptive family (Brodzinsky et al., 1998; Zamostny et al., 2003). According to Zamostny and colleagues (2003), the act of adoption influences the way developmental tasks are approached and can trigger psychological themes, such as rejection, grief, shame, and identity confusion. Prior to the 1900s, adoption occurred informally; however, the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century marked the professionalization of adoption with the intent to create better placements and eliminate baby markets (Bashi Treitler, 2014).

The social service component of the definition of adoption refers to the act of aiding the adoptive triad by identifying and legally freeing children to be adopted, selecting and preparing families for adoption, preparing and placing children in adoptive families, and providing post placement and post adoptive services (Zamostny et al., 2003). By placing the act of adoption under federal and state rule, government officials introduced professionalized racialization into the process of adoption by declaring many children as ineligible for adoption due to their race, religion, or disability status (Bashi Treitler, 2014). According to the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute (2014), there are three ways to adopt a child in the United States:

- by accessing the public child-welfare which has custody over children who have been removed involuntarily from their birth parents pursuant to allegations of abuse or neglect, or whose parents have died, been incarcerated, or abandoned them;

- by working with a nongovernmental, for-profit or not-for-profit agency to adopt a child whose birth parents have voluntarily placed him or her into the care of that agency for the purpose of adoption; or
- by arranging an independent adoption directly with the birth parents, without mediation by an agency, though often with the assistance of attorneys or other adoption intermediaries.

The term *special needs* was first introduced in the *Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment and Adoption Reform Act of 1978* and was defined as characteristics of a child that could make adoption more difficult (H.R. 6693 - 95th Congress, 1978). According to the federal government, the term special needs describes adoptable children who are either (a) over the age of 5 years; (b) from a minority background; (c) physically, emotionally, or developmentally disabled; or (d) part of a sibling group, all of whom are eligible for adoption (*Public Law 96-272 Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980*, 1980). Disruption is the removal of a child from the adoptive family prior to the legal finalization of the adoption, whereas dissolution refers to the reversal of adoption after legal finalization. Researchers indicate the following as some of the predictors for disruption within the special needs population: unrealistic adoptive parent expectations, rigidity of adoptive family functioning, low levels of social support for an adoptive family, history of physical or sexual abuse in child prior to adoption, and aggression or acting-out behaviors in the child (Zamostny et al., 2003).

According to the U.S. Census Data, African Americans, or Blacks, represent 13.3% of the total U.S. population (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2017). As of 2019, there were roughly 420,000 children in the care system, 23% of whom are identified as African American (Kalisher et al., 2020). Each respective state can categorize African American children in care as having

special needs and these children are often accompanied by subsidy funding upon completion of the adoption process, yet they remain overly represented in the care system (Rampage et al, 2012; Kalisher et al., 2020). Bashi Treitler (2014) discusses racialized politics and question the appropriateness of incentivizing the adoption of African American children by asking, “is it ethical to promote colorblindness as a policy or parenting strategy” (p. 1). Private adoption agencies are known to use race-based pricing to increase the probability that children of color will be adopted (Fedders, 2014). However, by reducing the cost of African American children and promoting a colorblind strategy, these agencies create instances that perpetuate notions of Black inferiority and operate against the best interest of the child.

### **Transracial Adoption**

During the post-emancipation era, extended biological family, friends, or other close members of the African American community raised displaced Black children (Fedders, 2014). Both Canada’s Open Door Policy and the Minnesota Parents to Adopt Minority Youngsters (PAMY) began with the explicit intention to place African American children in Black homes (Simon & Roorda, 2009). The continued disproportionate representation of Black children in the child-welfare system led some social workers of the 1960s to place these children with Caucasian families (Fedders, 2014). African American leaders of the 1960s describe efforts made by adoptive professionals to recruit Black families as minimal, halfhearted, and the antithesis of how the Black community historically cared for their displaced youth (Fedders, 2014). Why were the Black communities of this time unable or unwilling to support the least, the lost, and the left out? The answers to this question lay beyond the scope of this study; however, the repercussions of this phenomenon contributed to what we now know as transracial adoption.

Transracial adoption refers to the adoption of a child by parents of a different race or ethnicity (Zamostny et al., 2003). The National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) states, “Those born of Black-White alliances are no longer Black as decreed by immutable law and social custom for centuries. They are now Black-White, inter-racial, bi-racial, emphasizing the Whiteness as the adoptable quality...” (United States Government Accountability Office [U.S. GAO], 2007). However, according to Simon and Roorda (2009), these transracial children “have the potential for becoming catalysts for society in general” (p. 9).

During the Civil Rights Movement in the 1970s, there were more Caucasian parents wanting to adopt than babies that were available. This discrepancy between the number of Caucasian babies available for adoption and those ready to adopt, combined with a record increase in infertility amongst Caucasian couples, contributed to an increase in transracial, international, and special needs adoption (Zamostny et al., 2003). As the number of adoptions of African American children by Caucasian parents continued to grow, so did the concerns of the Black community. In 1972, the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) labeled transracial placements as *cultural genocide* (Zamostny et al., 2003). Since then, transracially adopted children have been found to score lower on racial identity measures than their in-race adoptive counterparts, which suggests that these children may struggle with establishing a positive ethnic identity (Baden, 2007).

Research regarding the social and psychological outcomes of transracial adoption is contradictory and often imbued with methodological limitations (Baden 2015; Butler-Sweet, 2011a; Weinberg et al., 2004; Zamostny et al., 2003). "Outcome research largely has addressed pragmatic questions about adoptee problems and has not been based on theory, thereby limiting the empirical understanding of the psychological processes underlying adjustment to adoption"

(Zamostny et al., 2003, p. 17). These outcome-based studies are often subjected to politically motivated criticisms of the findings that support or refute transracial adoption (Butler-Sweet, 2011a). Focusing on a success or failure paradigm only divides the research community and fuels the enduring controversy surrounding TRA.

**Proponents of Transracial Adoption.** There is over 30 years of research in support of transracial adoption (Bartholet, 2007; Feigelman & Silverman, 1983; Grow & Shapiro, 1974; McRoy et al., 1984; McRoy & Zurcher, 1983; Shireman & Johnson, 1986; Simon & Alstein, 1987; Simon & Roorda, 2009). Proponents for transracial adoption maintain that transracial adoption meets the psychosocial and developmental needs of these children and does not produce psychological or social maladjustment (Bartholet, 2007; Goar 2014; Simon & Roorda, 2009) and that growing up in a multicultural environment is beneficial for transracial adoptees (Weinberg et al., 2004). Despite pro-transracial adoption laws and increases in multiracial adoptive families across the United States, multiracial adoptive families continue to navigate a litany of public opinions and politics attached to their family system (Trenka et al., 2006).

The Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA) of 1994 and the Interethnic Adoption Provisions (IEP) of 1996 are two pieces of legislation that prohibit federally funded agencies from delaying or denying a foster or adoptive placement based solely on the adoptive family's race (Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE), 1994; Fedders, 2014). The stated purposes of MEPA were to (a) decrease the length of time that children waited to be adopted from foster care; (b) prevent discrimination in the placement of children on the basis of race, color, or national origin; and to (c) facilitate the identification and recruitment of foster care and adoptive parents who could meet these children's needs (Adkison-Bradley et al., 2012; MEPA, 1994).

While unintended, these laws support the belief in colorblind adoptions under the auspices of the best interest of the child.

MEPA-IEP prohibits agencies from assessing families' readiness to adopt transracially and from preparing the families for the inherent challenges of adopting a child of another race/ethnicity. These prohibitions, while meant to decrease racial disparities and discrimination practices, promote colorblind practices that prevent the implementation of widely accepted best practices that are regulated and enforced by the Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and the Intercountry Adoption Act of 2000. Noncompliance with MEPA-IEP is a violation of Title-IV of the Civil Rights Act and subject to a large fine; however, this act does not include regulations requiring adoptive parents to receive training related to transracial adoption. Despite MEPA-IEP, African American children remain overrepresented in foster care and underrepresented in the number of children who have been adopted from foster care (U.S. GAO, 2007; Hansen & Pollack, 2007). Furthermore, the implementation of MEPA-IEP has not resulted in diligent recruitment of potential same-race adoptive parents (Finding families for African American children, 2008).

There are others who do not believe in the need for federal laws or policies that ensure that Caucasian families are equipped to address the difficulties faced by African American children or of becoming a multiracial family (Kennedy, 2003). They argue that "race should not play a role in placement decisions and that policies and practices promoting the adoption of children of color by families of color fail to serve the children's best interests and discriminate against qualified White families" (Finding families for African American children, 2008, p. 19).

**Opponents of Transracial Adoption.** The main concern of NABSW and others is the subjective assessment of abuse or neglect the leads to the disproportionate removal of African

American children who are then placed in environments devoid of Black culture (Bradley & Hawkins-Leon, 2002; U.S. GAO, 2007). Opponents stress the importance of racial socialization for minority children and argue that this systematic dismantling of African American families and the resulting placement of Black children in Caucasian homes is cultural genocide (U.S. GAO, 2007). These opponents are also concerned that Caucasian parents are unprepared to help African American children navigate a racist society or develop a positive ethnic identity (Butler-Sweet, 2014; Goar, 2014; McGinnis et al., 2009). "...the situation being what it is, it would be cruel...to strip the child of his psychological armor against oppressive racism" (Chimezie, 1975, p. 301). Samuels (2009) agrees with the foretelling statement in 1972 from the NABSW, stating, "With adoption in the post-civil rights era, a partially White child will be preferable to a wholly African American child, and evidence suggests that those children are raised to emphasize their White heritage" (p. 81-82).

Critics of transracial adoption advocate for greater inclusion regarding adoption requirements, an increase in the efforts used to find potential African American parents, and the redefinition of the term *suitable family* (Goar, 2014; Kennedy, 2003). While this debate has lasted 35 years, there remains to be little direction for frontline professionals working with transracial adoptive families. In the words of Zamostny and colleagues (2003), "It is time to move beyond deficit paradigms that fail to explain the complexities of the adoption experience and shift to models that incorporate the strengths and risks of adoption,...and that shed light on how triad members cope with the stressors of adoptive family life" (p. 20).

### **Bicultural Identity**

Bicultural identity integration has been shown to serve as a protective factor against risk behavior (Manzi et al., 2014); to promote well-being in terms of self-acceptance and autonomy



(Ferrari, Ranieri et al., 2015); and to promote feelings of completeness and a well-rounded sense of self (Phinney & Devich-Nevarro, 1997). The origins for many of the theories on identity can be traced back to Erik Erikson's theory of human development and identity formation. While these theories on identity may have Eriksonian origins, Baden and Steward (2000) highlight the importance of distinguishing ego identity and ethnic identity. Ethnic identity is a social identity defined by the ethnic culture and heritage that one is given (Baden & Steward, 2000; Phinney & Rosenthal, 1992). Ego identity develops as one completes a series of goals or occupational decisions and is considered more stable and similar for adolescents across ethnicities (Baden & Steward, 2000). Conversely, ethnic identity evolves over time and differs within and across groups (Baden & Steward, 2000). While this study acknowledges the traditional emphasis of identity development and bicultural identity formation, a full review of the various theories on these constructs is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Researchers are examining the impact of adoption on racial/ethnic identity formation (Butler-Sweet, 2014; Delale-O'Connor, 2014; McGinnis et al., 2009; Mohanty et al., 2006; Samuels, 2009; Shiao et al., 2004; Tuan & Shaio, 2011). Parent's attitudes and behaviors related to racial socialization affect their TRA children's outcomes on a range of variables (Lee, 2003). According to Quiroz (2014), the parents' performance of identity represents how the parents view racial identity and how to discuss, express and moderate this identity. How parents recognize and treat race as socially meaningful is known as racial assignment (Quiroz, 2014). The extent of this recognition could influence how Caucasian adoptive parents socialize their African American children. "The ways that adoptive parents narrate identity results in e-racing race and creating neo-ethnics, or adoptive children who lack ties to their families and communities of origin and who are relocated and re-socialized into neo-ethnic identities through

a mixture of adopting-parent practices” (Quiroz, 2014, p. 134). These neo-ethnics learned the performance of Whiteness from their parents and have developed new identities that reflect the intersection of race, class, sexuality, gender, and adoption status (Quiroz, 2014).

Findings from Butler-Sweet (2014) indicate that class is a key factor in shaping Black identity. Concerning *authentic Blackness*, transracially adopted participants in Butler-Sweet (2014) explained their inauthenticity as a result of being raised by Caucasian parents. For them, *authentic Blackness* encapsulated urban street culture, slang, hip-hop, and lower socioeconomic status; characteristics that do not describe their lived experiences or how they self-identify. It is important to consider how transracial adoptees develop a sense of community and conceptualize their cultural, ethnic, and racial group membership. Such conceptualizations carry great meaning regarding self-concept, self-worth, and familial integration of self.

Shiao et al. (2004) examined how parents attend to racial differences and identified three main strategies: emphasizing ‘exotic yet non-threatening aspects’ of the child’s differences; acknowledging the racial differences and racism in America; and overlooking, or e-racing, the child’s differences. The Caucasian parents in this study reportedly had minimal knowledge of cultures outside of their own and were focused on helping their adopted Korean children assimilate into the mainstream culture (Shiao et al., 2004). For the parents in this study, overlooking or e-racing the child’s differences was the most commonly used strategy for addressing racial differences (Shiao et al., 2004). However, according to Mohanty et al., (2006), when adoptees received support from their parents for cultural socialization to their birth culture, they perceived their parents as warmer, more affectionate, and reported greater feelings of belonging.

Adoptee culture camps help adoptees and their parents navigate identity development by defining and teaching the fundamental and relational aspects of a racial identity (Delale-O'Connor, 2014). Delale-O'Connor (2014) presented three arguments: culture camps construct a particular form of ethnic/racial identity; culture camps are a reflection of the views and beliefs held by Caucasian American parents; and camps are less about understanding birth culture directly and more about providing adoptees exposure to adoptive peers, thereby building self-esteem. The socialization behaviors enacted in these camps celebrate the acceptable differences while minimizing the cultural aspects of the child that would present as conflictual to the parents' racial identity (Delale-O'Connor, 2014). However, as a result of the parental and contextual influence of culture camps, children develop a *natural culture* that Delale-O'Connor (2014) described as "easily put on and taken off within the space of camp" (p. 161). According to Delale-O'Connor (2014), curricula of the two culture camps did not include ways for parents to address issues of poverty, conflict, discrimination, and racism with their children.

Ethnic identity is a multidimensional construct that is deeply interwoven into an individual's self-concept and self-worth. Minoritized individuals are often associated with negative social identities; therefore, it is crucial to understand how the perception of one's identity shapes the lived experience and influences psychological well-being. When parents successfully support the negotiation and integration of multiple identities, transracially adopted children demonstrate greater ethnic pride (Yoon, 2001), positive adjustment in terms of higher levels of self-esteem and low levels of distress (Mohanty et al., 2006), and fewer externalizing behaviors (Johnston et al., 2007), which are all key to attaining psychological well-being (Yampolsky et al., 2016).

## **Socialization Behaviors**

Researchers over the past decade have examined ways in which racial-ethnic socialization is practiced and developed within transracial and international adoptive families (Bebiroglu & Pinderhughes, 2012; Crolley-Simic & Vonk, 2008; Goar, 2014; Hughes et al., 2011; Quiroz, 2014; Vonk et al., 2010; Witherspoon et al., 2009). Socialization involves “teaching [an individual] the social skills, behavior patterns, social understandings, values, and emotional maturity motivations needed to interact successfully and be a competent member of society” (Smetana, 2011, p. 173). The process of racial socialization is “the ways in which the messages that Black youth receive about the meaning and experience of being Black shape their perceptions of themselves...” (Hughes et al., 2011, p. 96). These messages come from parents, peers, family members, media, and the larger societal context in which the youth resides. Racial socialization within the family context is the process by which parent’s communicate racial knowledge (Goar, 2014). Peers shape the identity development process by defining the standards of what it means to be Black by sharing opinions on how to talk, dress, and what music genre and activities to engage in (Hughes et al., 2011). When viewed as a living entity, the larger societal context also shapes the youth’s identity by providing messages about who is important, who is smart, and who is troublesome (Hughes et al., 2011).

Racial socialization messages have an important impact on the development and psychological well-being of African Americans (Belgrave et al., 2000; Brown, 2008; Coard & Sellers, 2005; Frabutt et al., 2002). There are two fundamental assumptions about the process of racial socialization: “knowledge, ideas, and critical thinking about race develops as children age; and proximal processes in children’s daily lives shape their understanding of what it means to be members of particular racial or ethnic categories” (Hughes et al., 2011, p. 97). Messages on the

importance of racial pride, diversity, egalitarian values, and on how to recognize and manage discrimination come from parents and other members of the family (Hughes et al., 2011). Due to their privileged position in the racial hierarchy, Caucasian parents may not address the strategic or protective measures designed to navigate a racist system (Goar, 2014). If the transfer of parental knowledge is a key principle in racial socialization, how then do Caucasian parents of adopted children of color set the foundation for the development of a positive ethnic identity? How do MFTs facilitate the necessary systemic change to support the family with this task?

In cultural socialization, messages about race emphasize the importance of group pride, cultural knowledge and participation, and connection to one's ethnic community (Hughes et al., 2011). The racial socialization messages received in the home prepare the child for inter- and intra-racial interactions and can fall into one of two categories: protective racial socialization messages or proactive racial socialization messages (Barr & Neville, 2008). Preparation for bias is a type of protective racial socialization message that refers to the "messages promoting children's awareness of discrimination and providing tools for recognizing and coping with negative racial experiences" (Hughes et al., 2011, p. 98). Hughes and colleagues (2009) conducted a study about cultural socialization with early adolescents in an integrated school district. Findings from this study indicate that African American and Caucasian youth who experience frequent cultural socialization messages in the home also reported higher levels of self-esteem and positive ethnic identity (Hughes et al., 2009). Preparation for bias messages also create a sense of personal efficacy while preparing youth to access coping mechanisms to address racial experiences (Hughes et al., 2011).

Barr and Neville (2008) supply additional examples of protective racial socialization messages that (a) address racial barriers—"That message that I received was that as an African

American I had to work twice as hard as everyone else in order to be successful”; (b) counter stereotypes— “I was taught that it is hard for African Americans in America, so I had to get a good education and a good job so I can stand out from the stereotypical role of Blacks”; and (c) promotion of mistrust— “The White people are always trying to keep us down” (p. 141).

Proactive racial socialization messages focus on positive messages about the youth. According to Barr and Neville (2008), these messages address (a) racial pride— “Know who you are and be proud of it”; (b) egalitarian status— “That we all are equal and that no race is greater than the other”; (c) egalitarian treatment— “Everyone may be different but they should be treated with the same respect that I want and deserve”; and (d) self-development— “Life is going to be hard, but with hard work you can succeed” (p. 141).

Race consciousness acknowledges the comprehensive nature of race and racism, recognizes racial hierarchies, and responds in ways that address social injustices (Goar, 2014). Race identification, power discontent, system blame, and collective action orientation are the four components that traditionally characterize race consciousness (Appiah & Gutmann, 1996). Colorblind racism fails to acknowledge race as an organizing principle in society, normalizes positions of privilege, and sustains the notion of meritocracy (Goar, 2014). These perspectives anchor the ends of the race behavior continuum and illustrate the contradictory reports found in the literature and expressed by parents when talking about race (Goar, 2014). Goar (2014) used the theoretical perspectives of colorblindness and race consciousness to explore parental definitions of race. Findings indicate contradictory perspectives ranging from *race is unimportant* to *race is a central aspect of the child’s identity* (Goar, 2014).

Quiroz (2014) used virtual ethnography to explore adoptive parents’ meaning-making processes by analyzing the archived threads of four adoption forums with parents whose adopted

children are identified as: Chinese, Russian, Guatemalan, and African American. Small stories, a concept developed by Bamberg (2004) and Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008), is a descriptive term of how people use gossip, anecdotes, and comments in ordinary situations to construct their identity. By examining the small stories in these forums, Quiroz (2014) was able to see how parental participants utilize technology to describe how they narrate race, ethnicity, and culture to their transracially-adopted children. Findings indicate four dominant performances of identity, where parents are choosing, avoiding, keeping, and/or purchasing identity (Quiroz, 2014). Parents demonstrated greater instances of avoiding identity performances as they engaged in selective cultural socialization experiences (Quiroz, 2014). By avoiding or deeming racial realities as unimportant, Caucasian parents run the risk of minimizing their children's experiences with racial conflict while simultaneously dishonoring an important aspect of their children's identities.

Psychologists have documented that peer socialization influences developmental domains, such as moral development and sexuality; however, little is known regarding peers' role in the process of racial identity construction and the transmission of perspectives on race (Hughes et al., 2011). According to Brown et al., (2008), there are five models of peer socialization: peer pressure, antagonistic behaviors, behavioral reinforcement, behavioral display, and structuring opportunities. Peer pressure is the attempt to shape the attitudes or behavior of another person (Brown et al., 2008). In this model of socialization, peers attempt to persuade the youth to accept the group's values and beliefs of what it means to be Black. Unlike peer pressure, antagonistic behaviors do not include directives for preferred behaviors when the youth displays views or actions that are inconsistent with being Black (Brown et al., 2008).

These behaviors can be playful, such as teasing or mild ridiculing, or more aggressive, such as bullying, threatening, or relational aggression (Brown et al., 2008).

Behavioral reinforcement is the process through which peers socialize other youth's racial identities and knowledge by accepting youth who conform to norms and by verbally encouraging the displayed behavior (Brown et al., 2008). This reinforcement manifests as smiles, laughter, or prolonged engagement in topics that are viewed as legitimate interests for Blacks (Hughes et al., 2011). According to Brown and colleagues (2008), behavioral display, the fourth mechanism of peer socialization, refers to the display of actions and attitudes by the peer that the youth may adopt. Consistent with social learning frameworks, behavior display is the process of learning how to be Black by watching the behaviors of peers (Hughes et al., 2011). Structuring opportunities is the process of socialization whereby the peer creates opportunities to participate in Black activities or traditions without imposing racialized behaviors (Brown et al., 2008). By providing access to settings that are predominantly Black, the peer group fosters a sense of belonging, while also presenting an opportunity for the youth to enact particular types of racial identities (Hughes et al., 2011). Findings from Feigelman (2000) indicate that adoptees of transracial adoptive families who resided in predominately Caucasian communities experienced adjustment difficulties and greater discomfort regarding their physical appearance than those whose families resided in diverse areas. African American transracial adoptees typically reside in predominantly Caucasian communities and interact with Caucasian peers; therefore, it is important to discuss and understand the role of socialization in the development of a positive bicultural identity.



## Theoretical Frameworks

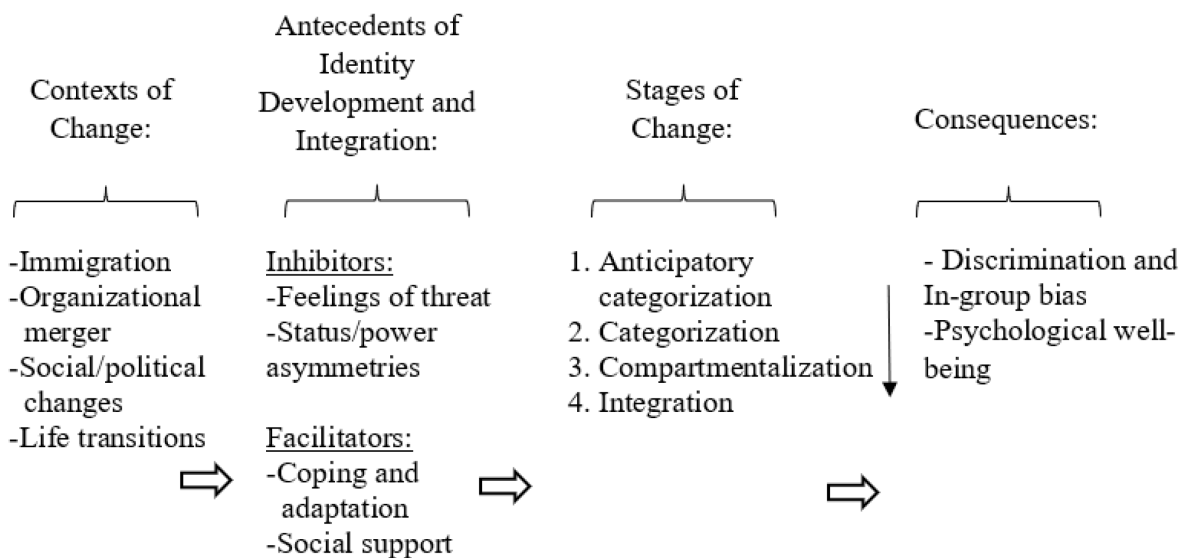
**Cognitive-Developmental Model of Social Identity Integration (CDSMII).** CDSMII is based on multiple developmental theories and has four stages that identify the process by which social identities develop and progressively become integrated into the overall self (Amiot et al., 2007). Tajfel (1981) defines social identity as “that part of the individual’s self-concept which derives from his or her knowledge of membership to a social group (or groups) together with the value and the emotional significance attached to it” (p. 255).

Social identity theory (SIT) and self-categorization theory (SCT) consider social identity as the key element that links people to their social groups and that this identity is a result of categorization (Amiot et al., 2007). Social identity theorists propose that social identity is a result of categorizations of meaning and stimuli received about and from worldly interactions (Amiot et al., 2007; Rosch, 1978). SCT focuses more on the cognitive processes involved in this method of categorization that account for why “individuals identify with a specific social category in one specific situation and which situational factors explain this fluctuating pattern of identification” (Amiot et al., 2007, p. 367). The assumptions of SCT are based on the principles of metacontrast and normative fit, meaning that, in order for a specific social identity to become salient, the intergroup differences need to be greater than the intragroup differences (metacontrast principle; Turner et al., 1987) and the objective differences between groups must match the expected stereotypical features of these groups (normative fit principle; Turner et al., 1987). Group members acquire and maintain a positive social identity through a process of social competition and discrimination (Amiot et al., 2007).

This social cognitive view of self is comprised of schemas, hierarchical knowledge structures that guide the processing of self-relevant information (Amiot et al., 2007). Self-

schemas are capable of short-term situational activation and long-term structural changes (Markus & Kunda, 1986; Smith 1996), and because they are arranged hierarchically, they organize self-specific elements under more inclusive elements (Marsh & Shavelson, 1985). According to intergroup social theorists, both differentiation of self into distinct components and the similarities between these components are necessary for integration (Amiot et al., 2007; Rafaeli-Mor & Steinberg, 2002). Additionally, when identities become integrated and organized within the global self-structure, the connection and links between the different self-components feel cohesive and become simultaneously important to the overall concept of self (Amiot et al., 2007). Amiot et al., (2007) drew from the a priori assumptions of these identity theories and used evidence from the neo-Piagetian developmental approach to create the CDSMII.

Amiot and colleagues (2007) identify antecedents of identity development and integration and propose four stages of social identity development for the CDSMII: anticipatory categorization, categorization, compartmentalization, and integration (see Figure 2.1). These researchers assert that over time, social changes can trigger profound intra-individual change to societal identities. Furthermore, these changes in social identities require a reorganization of the self-concept to integrate these new identities into a multifaceted cognitive collection of semi-related and highly domain specific knowledge structures (Amiot et al., 2007; Fiske & Taylor, 2017). A person may not experience anticipatory categorization if the change occurs spontaneously; however, many of life's change experiences are predictable and often trigger planning and other anticipatory behaviors (Amiot et al., 2007; see Table 2.1). Therefore, this stage takes place before one experiences a change and before encountering a new social group (Amiot et al., 2007).

**Figure 2.1***Overview of CDSMII*

*Note.* Overview of Cognitive-Developmental Model of Social Identity Integration (CDSMII). Reprinted with permission from “Integration of Social Identities in the Self: Toward a Cognitive-Developmental Model” by C. E. Amiot, R. De la Sablonnière, D. J. Terry, & J. R. Smith, 2007, *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 11(4), p. 365. Copyright 2007 by Society for Personality and Social Psychology, Inc.

During categorization, the person recognizes significant differences between the distinct social identities, which then reinforce their own characteristics of the original social group (Amiot et al., 2007). In the compartmentalization stage, the individual considers themselves as a member of different social groups (Amiot et al., 2007). While these multiple social identities remain highly contextual, the individual is not yet able to establish simultaneous identification (Amiot et al., 2007). During integration, the final stage, the individual realizes that their multiple identities are no longer contextually dependent and are simultaneously important to their overall definition of self (Amiot et al., 2007). Additionally, individuals in this stage develop the ability to be competent in two cultures and realize they do not have to discard or choose one identity over the other (Amiot et al., 2007).

Later, Yampolsky et al. (2013) conducted a qualitative study with multicultural individuals and used the CDSMII to examine how coherently categorized, compartmentalized, and integrated multiculturals constructed their own cultural life narratives. According to the results of this study, multicultural individuals with integrated cultural identities reported higher levels of psychological well-being than individuals with compartmentalized and categorized formulations (Yampolsky et al., 2013). Given the findings of this study, Yampolsky et al., (2016) developed the Multicultural Identity Integration Scale (MULTIIS) for individuals belonging to multiple cultural groups. These researchers built on the previous work examining bicultural identification and development and grounded MULTIIS in the developmental, social cognition, and cultural psychology literatures (Yampolsky et al., 2016). Previous scales, such as the Bicultural Identity Integration Scale (BII; Haritatos & Benet-Martínez, 2002) are limited to two identities and focus on the degree of integration.

**Table 2.1**

*Four Stage Model of Social Identity Development and Integration*

Stage	Characteristics
Anticipatory Categorization	Self-anchoring process in which self-characteristics and attributes are projected onto a novel group.
Categorization	Highly differentiated, isolated social identities. Predominance of one social identity over others. All-or-none nature of social identities. Little or no overlap between old and new identities.
Compartmentalization	Multiple identification is possible. Social identities are compartmentalized. No conflict experienced between social identities. Increased overlap between identities, but identification is contextually specific.
Integration	Recognition and resolution of conflict between different important social identities Interrelations are established between identities by recognizing the similarities between them Creation of higher order categorizations to resolve the conflict

Overlap between identities, such that total outgroups or  
partial in-groups become total in-groups  
Simultaneous identification becomes possible

---

*Note.* Adapted from “Integration of Social Identities in the Self: Toward a Cognitive-Developmental Model” by C. E. Amiot, R. De la Sablonnière, D. J. Terry, & J. R. Smith, 2007, *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 11(4), p. 365. Copyright 2007 by Society for Personality and Social Psychology, Inc.

This scale extends beyond the previous bicultural identity scales by measuring three distinct multicultural identity configurations; by accounting for several cultural identities; and by accounting for how individuals reconcile and organize these multiple identities (Yampolsky et al., 2016).

**Eudaimonic Well-Being.** Eudaimonics, or the theory of happiness, originated from the Greeks circa 1830 and has two imperatives: know yourself and become who you are (Ryff, 2014). This eudaimonic perspective is the foundation for humanistic and developmental conceptions of self-realization (Ryff, 2014). With the progression of time, theorists of existential, humanistic, developmental, and clinical psychologies have refined the eudaimonic perspective in an attempt to define overall psychological well-being (Ryff, 2014; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). The resulting theories originated from different foundations, lacked empirical rigor, and reportedly contained overlapping themes of what it meant to be self-actualized or at optimal functioning (Ryff, 2014). In an attempt to address these gaps, psychologist Carol D. Ryff developed the Ryff Scales of Psychological Well-Being (PWB; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). The PWB is a measure designed to operationalize eudaimonic well-being by measuring the following six theoretically grounded dimensions of psychological well-being: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). This study will only include the autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, and self-acceptance subscales (see Table 2.2). The PWB is grounded in the

theoretical frameworks of mental health (Jahoda, 1958), self-actualization (Maslow, 1968), optimal functioning (Rogers, 1961), maturity (Allport, 1961), and the developmental lifespan (Bühler, 1935; Erikson, 1959; Neugarten, 1968, 1973; See Figure 2.2).

Versions of the PWB have been used in over 350 scientific publications regarding development and aging (Helson & Srivastava, 2001; Springer et al., 2011); personality correlates (Gross & John, 2003; Paradise & Kernis, 2002); family experiences (Bell & Bell, 2009; Crespo et al., 2011); work and other life engagements (Lindfors et al., 2006; Strauser et al., 2008); health and biological research (Keyes, 2005; Montpetit, & Bergeman, 2007); and clinical and intervention studies (Keyes, 2002; Keyes et al., 2010).

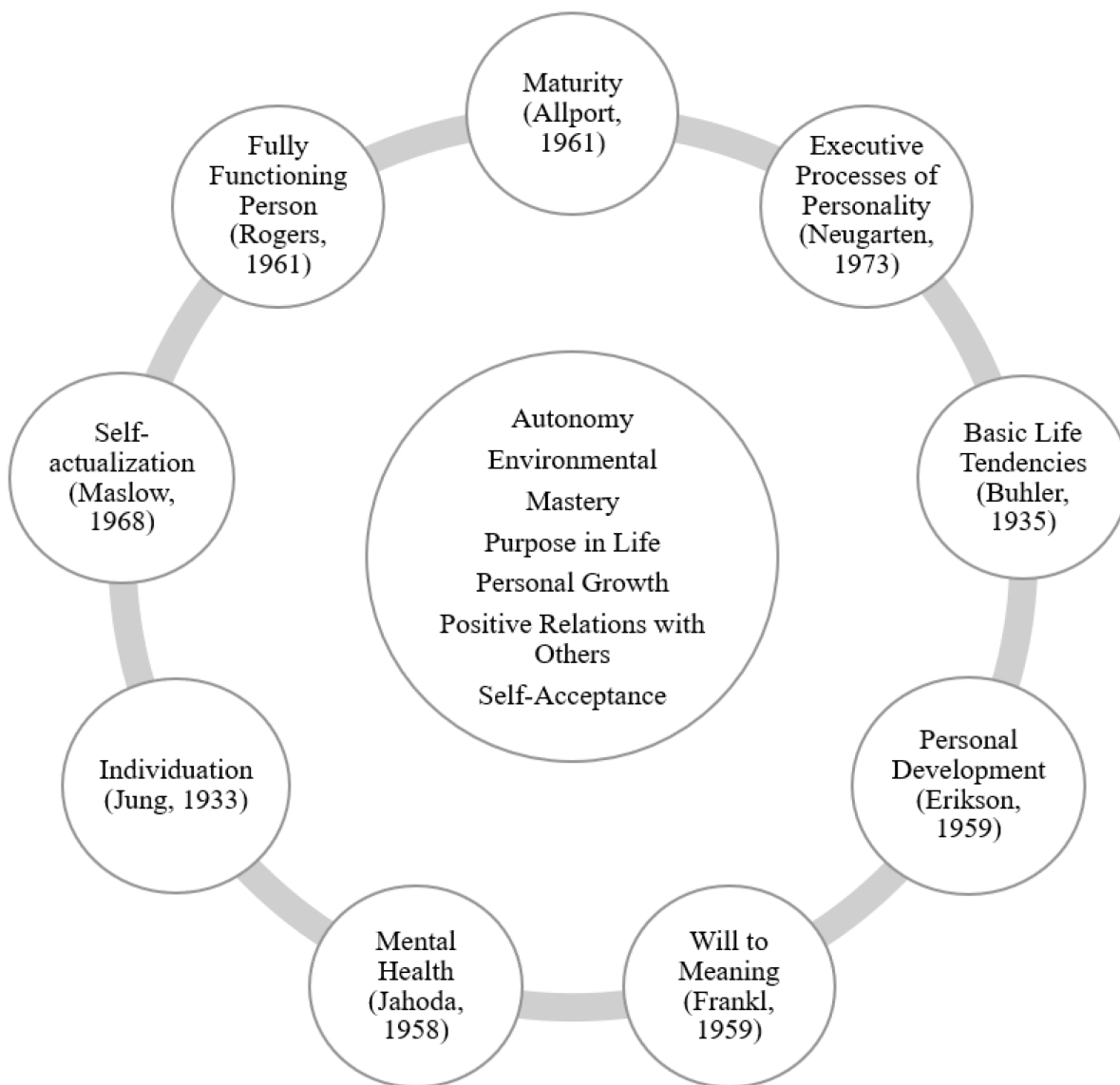
**Table 2.2***Definitions of Selected Psychological Well-Being Subscales*

Core Dimensions	Subscale Description
Autonomy	High Scorer - self-determining and independent; able to resist social pressures to think and act in certain ways; regulates behavior from within; evaluates self by personal standards
	Low Scorer - is concerned about the expectations and evaluations of others; relies on judgments of others to make important decisions; conforms to social pressures to think and act in certain ways
Environmental Mastery	High Scorer - has a sense of mastery and competence in managing the environment; controls complex array of external activities; makes effective use of surrounding opportunities; able to choose or create contexts suitable to personal needs and values
	Low Scorer - has difficulty managing everyday affairs; feels unable to change or improve surrounding context; is unaware of surrounding opportunities; lacks sense of control over external world
Personal Growth	High Scorer - has a feeling of continued development; sees self as growing and expanding; is open to new experiences; has sense of realizing their potential; sees improvement in self and behavior over time; is changing in ways that reflect more self-knowledge and effectiveness
	Low Scorer - has a sense of personal stagnation; lacks sense of improvement or expansion over time; feels bored and uninterested with life; feels unable to develop new attitudes or behaviors
Self-acceptance	High Scorer - possesses a positive attitude toward the self; acknowledges and accepts multiple aspects of self, including good and bad qualities; feels positive about past life
	Low Scorer - feels dissatisfied with self; is disappointed with what has occurred in past life; is troubled about certain personal qualities; wishes to be different than what they are

*Note.* Definitions of Selected Psychological Well-Being Subscales. Adapted with permission from “Psychological Well-Being Revisited: Advances in the Science and Practice of Eudaimonia” by C. D. Ryff, 2014, *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics*, 83(1), p. 12. Copyright 2013 by S. Karger AG, Basel.

**Figure 2.2**

*Dimensions of Psychological Well-being and their Theoretical Foundations*



*Figure 2.* Dimensions of Psychological Well-being and their Theoretical Foundations. Adapted with permission from “Psychological Well-Being Revisited: Advances in the Science and Practice of Eudaimonia” by C. D. Ryff, 2014, *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics*, 83(1), p. 11. Copyright 2013 by S. Karger AG, Basel.



**Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems.** The Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems (Circumplex Model) was created by Olson et al. (1979) and consists of three structural dimensions (flexibility, cohesion, and communication) that describe family functioning. The overarching hypothesis of the Circumplex Model is that “balanced levels of cohesion and flexibility are most conducive to healthy family functioning [and] unbalanced levels are associated with problematic family functioning” (Olson, 2011, p. 65). According to this model, cohesion is the emotional bonding family members feel towards one another and flexibility is “the quality and expression of leadership and organization, role relationship, and relationship rules and negotiations” (Olson, 2011, p. 65). The third concept, communication, is viewed as the facilitating dimension and is defined as the positive communication skills used within the family system (Olson, 2011).

Olson et al., (2002) operationalized these concepts into the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale, which is currently in its fourth edition (FACES IV). Assessors use self-report and therapist scales to classify families into the disengaged, separated, connected, or enmeshed categories on the cohesion scale and the rigid, structured, flexible, or chaotic categories on the adaptability dimension (Becvar & Becvar, 2009). These combined classifications result in 16 categories that describe family functioning (see Appendix A). Balance between the enmeshment and disengaged anchors on the cohesion dimension and the stability and change anchors on the flexibility dimension is key to problem reduction (Becvar & Becvar, 2009). Families that fall within the moderate classification on adaptability and cohesion demonstrate flexibility when responding to change procedures, rules, expectations, and interactions and tend to show emotional support, participate in activities together, and value each other’s company (Blume, 2006). It is possible that families who demonstrate the characteristics

of the moderate classification of the Circumplex Model will create home environments conducive to the development of a positive bicultural identity. Given the research presented in the sections above, the effects of family functioning and parental socialization on the process of identity formation seem worthy of further exploration.

### **Call for Competent Therapists**

Existing marriage and family therapy (MFT) literature emphasizes a need for real-world preparation of intensive, community-based work collaboration, including in-home therapy and multidisciplinary services (Adkison-Bradley et al., 2012; Drury et al., 2005; Biafora et al., 2007, Gehart & Lucas, 2007; Ivey & Collins, 2003; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2000). Adoptive families are outspoken about the unintentional harm caused by mental health providers when these professionals do not understand the dynamics and impact of adoption and previous trauma on children's overall development (Festinger, 2006; Riley, 2009 Voice for Adoption, 2009; Wind et al., 2007). While this call to action is rapidly gaining momentum in the academic sphere, the process of filtration to frontline professionals working with the adoptive and foster care population remains slow and fragmented. MFTs could address this unintentional harm and establish themselves as a beneficial resource for these families by increasing their level of competence in working with this population.

The body of research linking parental socialization related to race/ethnicity and child outcomes supports standards of professional practice that focus on preparing parents to assist the children they adopt transracially in positively integrating their heritage into their sense of self (Baden & Steward, 2000; Child Welfare League of America, 2000; Coakley & Orme, 2006; Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2014; Samuels, 2009; Vonk & Angaran, 2001; Yampolsky et al., 2016; Zamostny et al., 2003). For example, the Child Welfare League of

America (CWLA) Standards of Excellence for Adoption Services (2000) state: “Adoption services should be based on a recognition that children’s identity and self-esteem are integrally related to their cultural, ethnic, tribal, religious, and racial experiences. This belief should be reflected in the delivery of adoption and postadoption services ...” (p. 16). Such practice standards are based on the understanding that children fare better when their parents acknowledge racial differences, communicate openly about race and culture, and offer opportunities for children to gain knowledge and experience related to their birth groups (Vonk & Angaran, 2003). Research shows that transracial adoptive parents who received cultural competence training prior to receiving their child, perceived the inclusion of culturally relevant practices as important for their children’s development (Vonk & Angaran, 2001). Vonk and Angaran (2001) suggest parents and professionals participate in training modules that include components of culture, racial awareness, multicultural planning, and survival skills for minority children. Enacting a culturally competent practice means moving past an awareness of different cultures and racism and critically evaluating how personal beliefs, cultural differences and racism influences the decision-making process when determining parental fitness.

Most studies examine the parental perception of adjustment and well-being of the transracial adoptee (Barn, 2013; Coakley & Orme, 2006; Johnston et al., 2007; Vonk et al., 2010; Weinberg et al., 2004). While Weinberg et al. (2004) do address some of the methodological shortcomings of previous studies by including comparison groups and sampling from non-clinical populations, the authors do not include the voices of transracial adoptees. “Adoption and adoptive families will ultimately be stronger if we listen to and learn from the experiences of transracially adopted individuals” (Soojung Callahan, 2014, p. 246). The disregard or loss of ethnic identity has been associated with low self-esteem, behavioral problems, and psychological

distress (Brown & Ling, 2012; Feigelman, 2000; Mohanty, 2013; Yoon, 2001). In addition, previous studies and measures focus on assessing the degree to which the individual's identities are integrated without addressing the subjective experience or the process of socialization that honors the development of a positive ethnic identity. The belief that adopted children would be indistinguishable from biological children, that transracial adoptive family life would proceed as it does in biological families, originates from colorblind racism and ignores the lived experience of the minoritized adoptee.

Strides made by multiple counseling professions to raise awareness of social injustices call for ways in which therapists can use their position of power to advocate for change and assist the families of this population. When viewing the care system as a measure of social policy and attitudes towards children, the number of special needs children in care is reflective of the ineffectiveness of current policies and family support systems. Moreover, a majority of the studies examining African American adoptees and psychological adjustment are from over 35 years ago and driven by agendas to prove or disprove the appropriateness of transracial adoption (Andujo, 1988; Barth et al., 1988; McRoy et al., 1984; Silverman & Feigelman, 1981). Furthermore, the results from these studies may not reflect the psychological adjustment levels or lived experience of African American children adopted after the implementation of legislation such as the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, the MEPA-IEP of 2000, the Tax Relief Act of 2001, or the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008.

Transracial adoptive families experience additional challenges and we need more research on ways to improve policies and practices that will promote positive identity development and psychological well-being (Ferrari, Ranieri et al., 2015; Manzi et al., 2014; Rosnati et al., 2015; Yoon, 2001; Finding families for African American children, 2008).

Parents of adoptive and foster children often turn from one expert to the next, in search of a solution to their children's dilemmas. Concerns abound regarding Caucasian parents' ability to prepare minoritized children with the psychosocial tools to develop a positive ethnic identity and survive life in a racist society (Goar, 2014). "Parents can support children in successfully addressing these challenges, but they often need preparation and education to understand the issues and strategies for facilitating a positive racial identity" (Finding families for African American children, 2008, p. 22). Preparation and collaborative efforts are needed to address the additional challenges that arise within the family as a function of the unique circumstance of adoption. The extension of post adoption services into adolescence and beyond would present opportunities for transracial adoptive families to receive support while their children move through the developmental stages of identity formation. This support could help adolescents struggling with racial identity development, adjustment, and other developmental issues, which studies report as common areas of distress for this population (Butler-Sweet, 2011a, 2011b; Feigelman, 2000; Simon & Alstein, 2002).

The process of adoption can trigger unwanted emotions, initiate psychological themes that distract or interfere with human attachment and social interactions, and complicate the identity formation process. Overlooking, or e-racing the child's ethnic identity may be reported as a common strategy in multiethnic adoptive families; however, research studies and anecdotal information from the adoptive community stress the importance in providing cultural socialization opportunities that honor the child's ethnic identity development and promote bicultural identity integration. The lack of actionable knowledge for frontline professionals throughout the literature further demonstrates the gap in preparedness to meet the needs of this population. Advocates, parents, and transracial adoptees are calling for helping professionals to

divest from deficit-focused models of assistance and begin implementing strength-based practices that can be standardized and adequately address the needs of this population. Perhaps MFTs could help families move to secondary change by creating opportunities to incorporate the cursory knowledge learned at culture camps and other socialization experiences into the family's way of being and overall sense of identity. It is time to include the voices of transracial adoptees and find ways to support the families raising individuals that could become the catalysts for creating an inclusive and equitable society. In response to this call, this study seeks to move beyond the controversy surrounding transracial placements and focus on the development of a theoretical framework that addresses the needs of this population.

### CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Mixed method (MM) research is defined as “research in which the investigator collects and analyzes data, integrates findings, and draws inferences using both quantitative and qualitative approaches or methods in a single study or program of inquiry” (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007, p. 4). This mixed method grounded theory study (MM-GT), conducted from a social constructivist perspective, included a survey administered during Phase 1 and multiple semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted during Phase 2. Presented interview questions elicited information that described *what* the participants experienced with the phenomenon and *how* the experience happened within the given setting and context. Data collected from the transcribed interviews was subjected to a rigorous, systematic review and analysis process as outlined by Charmaz (2006). As a researcher operating from a social constructivist perspective, I acknowledge that personal, cultural, and historical experiences influenced my ability to bracket out biases that influence the overall study design and method of analysis (Daly, 2007). I conducted a sequential correlational study using nonprobability (purposive) and probability (cluster) sampling designs. I used the results of the data analysis from Phases 1 and 2 to propose a unified theoretical explanation of how Caucasian families can integrate cultural socialization behaviors into child rearing practices within their transracially adopted African American children.

Philosophical assumptions about reality, knowledge, values, and the ways in which we seek and evaluate information, shape how we conceptualize problems, formulate research questions, and select methods to answer those questions (Creswell, 2013). The philosophical orientation most often associated with MM is pragmatism, “a deconstructive paradigm that debunks concepts such as ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ and focuses instead on ‘what works’ as the truth

regarding the research questions under investigation” (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003, p. 173). According to the ontological and epistemological assumptions of a social constructivist perspective, there are multiple, co-constructed realities that are shaped by our lived experiences and interactions with others (Creswell, 2013). Axiological and methodological assumptions describe information as gained and evaluated by inductive methods of emergent ideas, where a person’s values are negotiated and honored between and amongst other individuals (Creswell, 2013). In accordance with the social constructivist paradigm, I respected and honored each participant’s set of values throughout the research and interview process as I developed a theoretical framework for developing a positive bicultural identity.

## **Participants**

**Phase 1.** Prospective participants for the survey portion of this study were African American, transracial-adoptees, ages 20 – 35, who were born in the United States of America. These adults must have lived with a Caucasian, adoptive family for a minimum of five years, and self-identified as bicultural individuals. I used a combination of purposive and convenience sampling to recruit participants who met the criteria listed above but was unable to recruit a sample large enough to complete the statistical analyses proposed for this phase of the study. I received three completed surveys from participants who declined the opportunity to participate in Phase 2. Due to my inability to recruit an appropriate sample size, I was unable to complete Phase 1 of this study. I have included the barriers and limitations attached to the removal of Phase 1, in addition to the overall barriers for this study, in the *Limitations* section.

**Phase 2.** Prior to conducting this study, I planned to use cluster sampling to invite participants identified by the survey results as having a positive bicultural identity, along with good psychological well-being, to participate in a 60 – 90-minute, semi-structured interview



exploring their experience of cultural socialization behaviors. If there were no participants who met these criteria, I intended to randomly select and invite 15 to 20 Phase 1 participants to voluntarily partake in the interview process. I was unable to recruit or identify a statistically significant sample size during Phase 1 to follow the proposed selection of participants for Phase 2.

The three participants I was able to recruit for Phase 2 do meet the initial inclusion criteria and are African American, transracial-adoptees, ages 20 – 35, who were born in the United States of America. These participants lived with their Caucasian, adoptive families for a minimum of five years, and self-identify as bicultural individuals (see Table 3.1). I have included the barriers and limitations that led to the alteration of Phase 2, in addition to the overall barriers for this study, in the *Limitations* section.

**Table 3.1**

*Phase 2 Participant Demographic Information*

Participant	Age	Gender	Race	Race of Adoptive Parents	Age of Adoption
Interview 1	29	Female	African American	Caucasian	8
Interview 2	23	Male	African American/First Native	Caucasian	8
Interview 3	33	Male	African American	Caucasian	12

**Recruitment**

**Phase 1.** I sent the email invitation with a link to the survey to the agencies listed below. I intended for the agency to handle initial contact with the families until said families give written permission for me, the researcher, to contact them. However, I did not receive any

participants from the email invitation, nor the agencies listed below. The agencies, Internet sites and support groups that received the recruitment flyer are:

- National Foster Parent Association (NFPA) [www.nfpainc.org](http://www.nfpainc.org)
- Alan Guttmacher Institute
- American Public Human Services Association
- Child Welfare Research Center at Berkeley
- Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute
- Voices for Adoption
- Resurrection House of Florida
- Racial Justice Rising~Mass Slavery Apology in Greenfield, Massachusetts
- Facebook Groups and Personal Contacts
- Reddit
- Instagram

The three individuals who completed the survey were identified through word of mouth and expressed their willingness to participate in this study. I sent these individuals the email invitation with a link to the survey portion of this study. All three participants declined participation in Phase 2 of this study.

In an effort to recruit more participants, I submitted a request to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Antioch University New England (AUNE) to reverse the order of this study and conduct semi-structured interviews with willing participants as Phase 1 and collect survey data as Phase 2. This change in recruitment did not yield any participants. I selected one participant who completed the survey and presented them with a \$50.00 Amazon.com gift card for their

contribution to this study. This gift card was presented after I closed the data collection phase of this study.

**Phase 2.** The proposed participants for Phase 2 were to include 15 to 20 individuals identified in Phase 1 as having a positive bicultural identity and good psychological well-being. The proposed inclusion criteria for Phase 2 are as follows: Family Cohesion, Family Flexibility, and Total Circumplex Ratio scores greater than or equal to 1.0; average Family Satisfaction and Family Communication scores greater than or equal to *Satisfactory*; and MULTIIS and PWB scores that fall above one standard deviation of the mean. As noted above, I was unsuccessful in recruiting a sample size large enough to conduct the assessments needed to determine the proposed inclusion criteria. To recruit participants for this phase of the study, I submitted a request to the IRB at AUNE to develop an advertisement flyer with pull tabs and a QR code that linked to the landing page: <http://karmen.info/transracial-study/>. I posted this flyer in public places and schools located in the tri-county area of Central Florida (Pinellas, Hillsborough, and Manatee Counties). I was able to recruit three participants to complete the 60-minute semi-structured interview (see Table 3.1). Each participant received \$20 for completing the interview.

I used reverse snowball sampling to recruit additional participants for this study. In reverse snowball sampling, the researcher would provide the current participant with the contact information for the study and request that he/she/they have the potential participant contact the researcher. This method of recruiting did not yield additional participants for this study; therefore, I closed data collection with a total of three participants.

## **Measures**

**Phase 1.** The first 10 items of the survey are a collection of multiple-choice, open-ended, and fill-in questions to collect demographic information regarding age, gender, age at adoption,

ethnicity, family structure, and contact with birth family (see Appendix B). During Phase 1, I used the following quantitative assessments to operationalize positive bicultural identity, psychological well-being, and family cohesion, flexibility, communication, and satisfaction.

***Multicultural Identity Integration Scale (MULTIIS).*** The MULTIIS is a 22-item, self-report scale with Likert-type ratings ranging from 1 to 7, with 1 corresponding to “Not at all” and 7 to “Exactly.” This assessment measures three distinct multicultural identity configurations: categorization, integration, and compartmentalization (Yampolsky et al., 2016). The reported Cronbach’s Alphas for interim reliability are as follows: integration subscale = .87, categorization subscale = .58 and compartmentalization subscale = .66 (Yampolsky et al., 2016). Results from the confirmatory factor analysis on construct validity and goodness of fit largely support the three-subscale factorial structure (Yampolsky et al., 2016) used. The MULTIIS demonstrates good convergent validity as evidenced by the correlations between the assessment’s subscales and previously established measures of cultural identity integration and personal and cultural identification (Yampolsky et al., 2016). The integration subscale predicts positive well-being outcomes and evidenced by its positive correlations to vitality, positive affect, self-esteem, and the personal growth subscale of the Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWB; Yampolsky et al., 2016).

***Family Adaptability and Cohesion Scale IV (FACES IV).*** The FACES IV is a self-report measure completed by one or more family members and has been used in over 500 studies (Olson, 2011). FACES IV consists of six scales and two subscales, two balanced scales and four unbalanced scales, which assess two dimensions, flexibility, and cohesion, of the Circumplex Model and the communication and satisfaction subscales (Olson, 2011). The flexibility dimension is measured on a continuum ranging from rigid to chaotic and the cohesion dimension

continuum ranges from disengaged to enmeshed (Olson, 2011). This assessment has three previous versions; however, Olson (2011) developed FACES IV as a reliable, valid, and clinically relevant self-report measure that assesses the full dimensions of cohesion and flexibility. The two balanced scales of cohesion and flexibility are highly correlated, which supports the main hypothesis of the Circumplex Model ( $r = .60$ ; *shared variance* = .36; Olson, 2011). The unbalanced areas of the continuum are related, with reports of a high negative correlation between balanced cohesion and disengaged ( $r = -.80$ ) and a low negative correlation between balanced and enmeshed ( $r = -.15$ ; Olson, 2011). The two unbalanced areas are reportedly positively correlated ( $r = .27$ ; Olson, 2011).

The discriminant validity, or the average predictive accuracy of FACES IV to separate members into problem and non-problem groupings, is 92%, with a range from 84% to 99% (Olson, 2011). The alpha reliability for all six scales is very good and reported as follows: Enmeshed = .77, Disengaged = .87, Balanced Cohesion = .89, Chaotic = .86, Balanced Flexibility = .84 and Rigid = -.82 (Olson, 2011). The internal consistency reliability of the family communication scale is .90 based on a national sample of 2,465 individuals and test re-test of .86 (Olson & Barnes, 2010). Based on a sample of 2,465 family members, the 10-item family satisfaction scale has an alpha reliability of .92 and test re-test of .85 (Olson, 2010). The mean score for the family communication scale is 36.2 and the standard deviation is 9.0 based on a sample of 2,465 individuals (Olson & Barnes, 2010). Based on a sample of 2,465 family members, the mean score for the scale is 37.5 and standard deviation is 8.5 (Olson, 2010). This assessment has good content and construct validity as evidenced by confirmatory factor analysis and expert therapists (Olson, 2011).

The Circumplex Model is based on the idea of curvilinear dimensions, such that very low (0-15%) and very high (85-100%) areas represent unbalanced or problematic aspects of cohesion and flexibility (Olson, 2010). The developers created flexibility and cohesion dimension scores for plotting on the graphic representation of the Circumplex Model by adjusting the balanced score up or down the scale (Olson, 2010). Percentile scores are used for each scale, which are derived from the raw scores (Olson, 2010). This adjustment of the scores is based on whether the difference in the two unbalanced scales is at the high or low of the dimension (Olson, 2010). “Dimension scores should not be used for research since they are based on percentage scores which are linear”, therefore, I will use the Cohesion Ratio, Flexibility Ratio and Total Circumplex Ratio scores in my data analysis (Olson, 2010, p. 2).

***The Ryff Scales of Psychological Well-Being (PWB).*** The 84-item long version of PWB contains six subscales that measure psychological well-being: Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Personal Growth, Positive Relations with Others, Purpose in Life and Self-Acceptance (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). I used the following four subscales to operationalize psychological well-being in this study: Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Personal Growth and Self-Acceptance. The reported internal consistency alphas are .93 for self-acceptance, .86 for autonomy, .90 for environmental mastery, and .87 for personal growth (Ryff, 2014). The test-retest reliability alphas are .85 for self-acceptance, .88 for autonomy, .81 for environmental mastery, and .81 for personal growth (Ryff, 2014). The shortened version for this study contains 56 items.

**Phase One Hypotheses.** I intended to use the results from FACES IV and MULTIIS to test the following research hypotheses:

- There is a positive correlation between family flexibility and identity integration;
- There is a positive correlation between family satisfaction and identity integration;

- There is a positive correlation between family communication and identity integration and;
- There is a positive correlation between family cohesion and identity integration.

Due to insufficient data, I was unable to conduct the statistical analysis necessary to test these hypotheses.

**Phase 2.** Interviews serve as a sufficient device to collect additional data and focus the discussion on the overall research question (Charmaz, 2006). I developed questions for the semi-structured interview as a guide for the interviews, with the awareness that these questions may change as I move through the process of data collection. The shifting nature of the interview questions is typical when conducting constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). I used member checking, in vivo paraphrasing during the interview session, and consultations with an experienced researcher throughout the coding and analysis process to maintain validity. I established trustworthiness and facilitated member checking by conducting debriefing sessions with each participant and providing them a copy of their transcribed interview.

## **Procedure**

**Phase 1.** In this phase, I aimed to measure bicultural identity integration, family flexibility and cohesion, and overall psychological well-being by administering the MULTIIS, FACES IV, and PWB via SurveyMonkey. A cross-sectional survey design with electronic delivery was the method I used to collect the data necessary to answer the previously stated research questions. An electronic invitation with informed consent to participate in the computerized survey was sent to adoption agencies, community agencies, support groups, Facebook, Craigslist, and publicly listed email addresses (see Appendix C). I intended for this

invitation to connect willing participants to the online survey software supplied through SurveyMonkey at [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com).

The purpose of the study, the assurance of confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of the study were provided in the first section of the survey. The selected member must consent to participation in the study before they can access the survey. The time for survey completion was 20 - 30 minutes. Software provided by Survey Monkey ensured that participants could take the survey only once and collected the data for further analysis by the researcher. Given that I was unsuccessful in recruiting an appropriate sample size and the three participants in this phase were unwilling to complete Phase 2, I randomly elected one participant, presented them with the previously advertised \$50 Amazon gift card, and ended Phase 1 of this study.

**Phase 2.** Upon contact via phone, each participant and I agreed on a private and safe place to conduct the interview. I began the semi-structured interviews with an introduction to the study and a review of the informed consent materials (see Appendix D). During this process of informed consent, I reviewed the purpose of the study, the amount of time needed to complete the interview, risks and benefits of participation, and dissemination plans for the results of the interview. I then provided the participant with a copy of the consent form and my contact information.

The content of the interview guide focused on exploring the cultural socialization behaviors experienced while growing up in a transracial adoptive family. For example, I asked participants how they define bicultural identity and what culture-specific activities they participated in as a child. I asked probing and content-specific follow-up questions to clarify their response and further develop the description of their experience. I audio recorded the participants' interview session and transcribed the gathered information for analysis. I began the

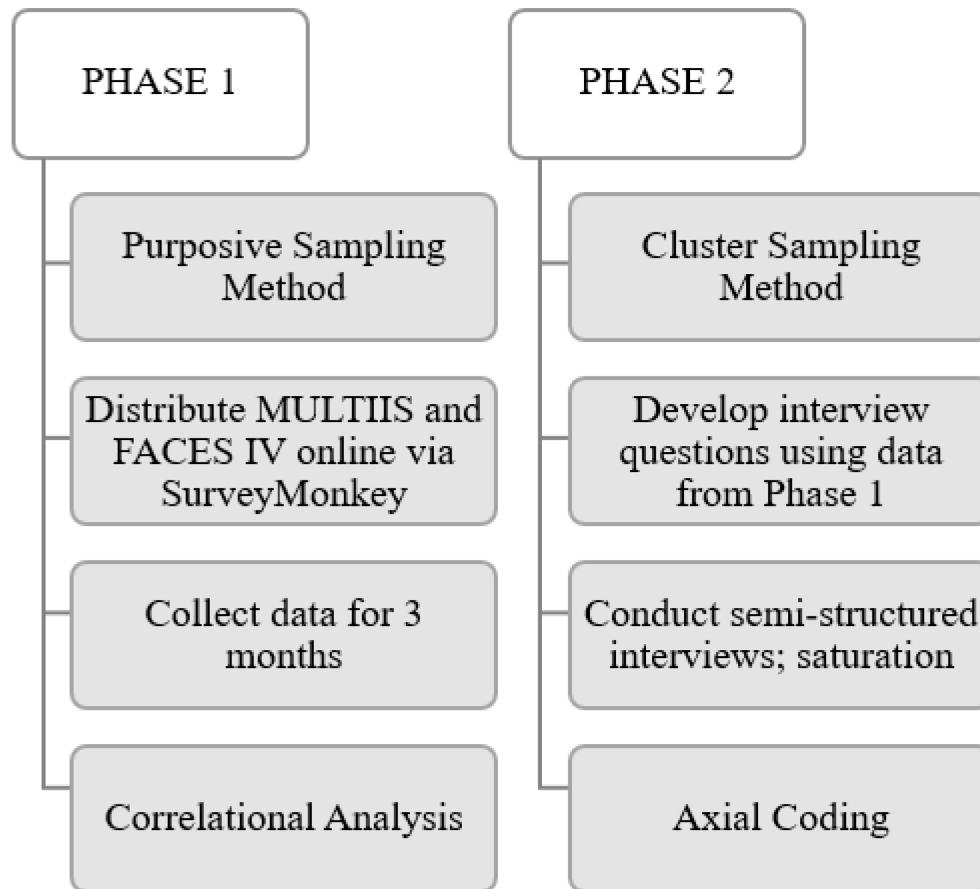


transcription process after the first interview and sent the completed transcript to the participant. In an effort to present an accurate reflection of the participant's lived experience, I presented participants with a copy of the transcribed interview and conducted a 10-15-minute phone call to discuss the transcript and assure accuracy of the presented information. Coding and data analysis during this phase entailed a reiterative process that led to a proposed unified theoretical explanation for developing a positive bicultural identity in African American-Caucasian transracial adoptive families (see Figure 3.1).

### **Data Analysis**

**Phase 1.** If I had collected a sufficient amount of data, I intended to conduct exploratory measures to see if the data met parametric or nonparametric assumptions. I would then have selected methods of analysis that corresponded with the assumptions of the data. For example, if I was looking for a relationship between variables and my data was non-parametric, I would have conducted a cross-tabs analysis to calculate Chi-Square. Then I would have used the results from FACES IV and MULTIIS to test the following research hypotheses:

- There is a positive relationship between family flexibility and identity integration;
- There is a positive relationship between family cohesion and identity integration
- There is a positive relationship between family satisfaction and identity integration; and
- There is a positive relationship between family communication and identity integration.

**Figure 3.1***Sequential Design Steps*

Since all four hypotheses involve identity integration, I originally planned to conduct a multiple regression model to determine the relationships between the variables. Due to the original study design, I was aware that I would not be able to draw causal inferences; however, I was predicting high external validity given the participation by transracial adoptees throughout the United States. I was, however, unable to conduct the proposed analyses to test the presented hypotheses. Therefore, I have no data to analyze and present for this phase of my study.

**Phase 2.** I originally intended for the results from Phase 1 to inform the construction of open-ended questions for the semi-structured interviews in Phase 2. Since this option was no

longer available, I used the IRB approved questions I constructed when developing this study. These questions address the participants' thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and other contextual information about their process of cultural socialization (Charmaz, 2006). During the interviews, I explored taken-for-granted meanings of phrases in order to reveal hidden assumptions and collect rich data (Charmaz, 2006). I engaged in memoing and simultaneously collected and analyzed the data such that the emergent themes were able to inform later interviews. I deleted extraneous questions and added additional questions in an attempt to follow the leads of my emerging theoretical categories (Charmaz, 2006).

Data collected from the transcribed interviews underwent a rigorous, constant comparison method as outlined by Charmaz (2006). I began this systematic and recursive method of analysis by reading the individual interviews to develop a sense of the whole interview as a single meaning unit. After completing this step, I began the coding process by conducting a line-by-line constant comparative method of analysis. I asked myself "What theoretical categories might these statements indicate?" as a way to guide my process (Charmaz, 2006, p. 113). I then synthesized and organized these initial codes into theoretical categories. Through memoing, I was able to elaborate categories, specify categorical properties, and define relationships between categories (Charmaz, 2006).

The results from these analyses are contextually situated in time, place, culture, and situation (Charmaz, 2006). I used member checking, in vivo code confirmation during the interview session, and consultation with my committee member who is experienced in conducting social constructivist grounded theory research to validate my data. To enhance trustworthiness and further validate the findings, I conducted 10-15-minute individual debrief sessions after I analyzed the data. The resulting analysis is my attempt to provide a unified

theoretical explanation on how to promote a positive bicultural identity by integrating cultural socialization behaviors.

### **Ethical Considerations**

For the purpose of this study, I was interested in the cultural socialization behaviors that contribute to identity development in transracially adopted individuals. I believed participants who volunteered for this study would do so based on personal interest and a desire to support the development of an enhanced system of adoption service delivery. I selected a mixed method approach with the belief that it would allow for greater exploration of the participant's experience by quantifying the research variables and assisting in identifying participants eligible for interviewing. The use of the in-depth interview allowed me to seek accuracy and engage in member checking when reporting the information disclosed during the session.

Participation in this research study involved no more than minimal risk, defined by the *Federal Code of Regulations* as circumstances in which “the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests” (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2021). All participants were informed verbally and in writing of their right to withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. There were no psychological interventions, physiological interventions or deceptions involved in this study. Data collection through survey and audiotape recording was noninvasive and posed minimal risk to the participant.

Involvement in this study possibly created an opportunity for reflection and further evaluation of the participants' personal attitudes and behaviors regarding bicultural identity development. Findings from this study could potentially cultivate knowledge, solidify the

participant's sense of identity, and assist in developing best practices for marriage and family therapists working with transracial adoptive families; however, engaging in a discussion about one's subjective experience can understandably present some level of discomfort. Some of the interview questions may have activated sensitive or difficult topics that may have been accompanied by uncomfortable emotions such as self-doubt and anxiety. However, the risk of harm for participants involved in this research study was minimal and no greater than what they would normally experience in day-to-day conversations.

As a precautionary measure, I provided participants with a list of counseling agencies within the community at the conclusion of each interview. I also made myself available after the interview in the event that the participant is in immediate need of direction to counseling services due to the impact of the interview questions. The participant and I agreed to meet in a private and safe location to conduct the interview. I preserved the anonymity of participants in all documentation and there was minimal risk of social harm. Participant follow-up will include providing a written transcript of the interview for review and comments, as well as providing preliminary results of the study for participant review.

After reading this study, future practitioners may gain knowledge on how to engage as an MFT in the real-world context of transracial adoption. Therapists may also be exposed to ways to broaden their focus from the intra-psychic concerns of their clients to include the external forces that adversely affect clients' emotional and physical well-being. The benefits of heightened self-awareness and the contribution to the field of marriage and family therapy outweigh the minimal risks associated with this study.

## **Confidentiality**

**Phase 1.** When surveys are created on SurveyMonkey, the company safeguards respondents' email addresses and stores the data on secured servers located in the United States (SurveyMonkey, 2017). All accounts created on SurveyMonkey require unique usernames (SurveyMonkey, 2017). All passwords connected with these unique usernames have the minimum complexity requirements (SurveyMonkey, 2017). As creator of the survey, I own all the data included in, and collected by, the survey; SurveyMonkey cannot share or sell my data without my permission (SurveyMonkey, 2017). The only exception to this rule regarding ownership and confidentiality is if SurveyMonkey receives a subpoena compelling them to release some or all of the collected information (SurveyMonkey, 2017). I stored my data on the secured servers with SurveyMonkey and performed data analyses on my personal, password-protected computer. This computer was stored in a locked carrying case.

I de-identified participants' personal information by assigning an alphanumeric code to the respondents' survey results. I kept these codes in a password-protected file separate from the survey results. I kept all de-identified data on an encrypted flash drive that I stored in a locked box, in a locked file cabinet, in a locked room, within my place of residence. I am the only person with the keys to the locked box located in the locked file cabinet. This strengthened "tri-lock system", along with the encryption software located on the flash drive, was intended to keep survey data safe and confidential. After the seven years of storage, I will delete the data from the hard drive of the computer and destroy the encrypted flash drive.

**Phase 2.** I conducted interviews at a mutually agreed upon, private location. I used audio recording as a method of data collection and transcribed the recorded interviews with an identification code of the date and time of the interview. No personal identifying information

was attached to the collected data. All data is password protected and will be stored for the requisite period of five years.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

According to Yampolsky et al., (2016), cultural identity refers to the feeling of being a member of a particular cultural group, and the experience of aligning with values, beliefs, behaviors, etc. of a particular culture. After reviewing the data, we, the interviewer and participants of this study, offer the following as constructed definitions of culture and bicultural identity. Culture is more than just where you come from, it is who you are and how you feel as a person in connection with other people who share history, language, customs, religion, beliefs, and traditions. Bicultural identity is the possession of defining aspects of different cultures. We described the experience of having a positive bicultural identity as having the ability to integrate and adapt the defining aspects of your multiple identities in a harmonious way that allows you to blend in with different cultures.

The reported experiences paralleled the dichotomy identified in the literature, with participants describing both empowering and discouraging situations that contributed to the development of their bicultural identity. Based on these definitions, and in response to my research question, 6 themes on the experience of transracial adoption and the development of a positive bicultural identity emerged from the data: Representation Matters; Put Up or Shut Up; They Ain't Ready; We All Family Here, and Stuck Between Two Worlds; Part of Both, Claimed by Neither (see Table 4.1). Additionally, the presence of these 6 themes appears to be describing an integrated and reciprocally recursive process of development towards a positive bicultural identity, with connections to critical areas of cultural competence for transracial adoptive parenting (see Figure 4.1). Lastly, in an effort to further elevate the perspective of the adoptee, I have included messages directly from the participants on the subject of transracial adoption. A



description of the 6 emergent themes, the constructed thematic process, and the verbatim messages from the participations are provided below.

### **Theme 1: Representation Matters**

Participants of this study identified seeing Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and the representation of other cultures and races as activities that helped create a positive bicultural identity. Participants described experiences at school where “going to an elementary school that was mostly Black” and having friends at school that “would fill me in on the cultural nuances of being Black” helped with identity development. One participant noted how their parents “having positive interactions with black people might have influenced them when they were adopting” and how that influence, along with “being integrated with different cultures really helped.” Another recalled, “I did have one football coach and one teacher who were African American, and my parents were hoping that maybe that can rub off, grow on me, because they were very successful.”

While the presence of BIPOC was important, participants also mentioned the acceptance and integration of BIPOC in their lives. One participant described the experience of integration, stating “I think... they’ve kinda of... instead of being a book [that my parents gave me], they’re like a living book. So now, there’s that connection between, you know, like what’s on paper and what’s there in a person and in our culture.” Another summarized their experience, “seeing everything integrated like that, just being with different people and different cultures, sorta became the norm”. Others spoke of acceptance, “my Guidance Counselor...She was Black, and she always accepted me for who I was.”

Participants also recalled how the absence of BIPOC in different situations contributed to their identity development. One participant described the change in location after they were

adopted by their Caucasian parents, stating “Being the majority where you grew up, where there was nothing but Us, to then moving into a situation where you were now a minority; that was hard.” One described their experience regarding the reintegration of BIPOC after the adoption, stating that “I learned that those were like the missing pieces to my puzzle.” For the participants of this study, representation matters.

**Table 4.1***Phase 2 Constructed Themes*

Theme	Significant Statements
Representation Matters	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The older African Americans would tell me about different people, like Booker T. Washington, like Amiri Baraka. They'd tell me about different people not just the stereotypes; they'd tell me about mathematicians, scientists, writers.</li> <li>2. I was always like, to my mom, 'oh let's go here! Are there black people?' She always thought I was being funny; I'm being serious.</li> <li>3. My parents told me, 'we can't teach you and there's no one that's African American around; no one that we're close to that can teach you these things'.</li> <li>4. My parents did a bang-up job I really appreciate what they did but, not all parents might be like my parents. They might not if you get more conservative people, you might have people that try to hide their kids' ethnic identity which is not a healthy thing.</li> </ol>
Put Up or Shut Up	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. When I was getting adopted, there were people in the Black and White community that said, 'I don't think this is a good idea' and my parents would actually ask 'do you wanna adopt him' and they would go (laughter) 'no no no I mean, he has a lot of baggage. We really can't deal with that' and they'd [my parents] say 'then you need to stay in your lane.'</li> <li>2. I'd rather have this life than the life I would have had.</li> <li>3. [When people would say something about our family], my parents were like 'this is our son, you know, you go adopt your own son'.</li> </ol>
They Ain't Ready	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Like when I went to go get my car. My mom was a co-signer on my lease. Why wasn't it believable that she's my mother? She had to send a copy of her ID Why is that not believable; 'this is your mother?', YES YES! When it comes down to stuff like that, that's very hard.</li> <li>2. I remember one day when we were driving down the street and this lady was at the stop sign; she was like 'get that nigger out of your car'!</li> <li>3. I think one of my biggest... I won't say faults... one of my biggest conundrums is balancing [my sense of pride] with expectations [of society] so, when you (hitting hand in hand) go against those expectations you're gonna run into issues.</li> </ol>
We All Family Here	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. It was almost like it was a safe haven; it was a safe place for me to be.</li> <li>2. Absolutely I think that it is helpful. Especially for somebody growing up that may be confused about growing up that way;</li> </ol>

whose parents look different from them cause then it's like 'oh! Well, I have a friend that lives across the street; his parents look different from him too'.

3. So, everybody knew everybody, so it wasn't like, you know, 'oh man! Who is this little black kid?', cause a lot of families in that community had bi-racial families.

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Stuck  
Between Two  
Worlds; Part  
of Both,  
Claimed by  
Neither

1. No, they always, I always felt like the African Americans always looked at me differently. Like sometimes they still do; if they're not comfortable around me or I'm weird. There was even a girl here that was saying that I was weird. And then like a lot of Black girls will just say, 'you're weird'.
2. Being able to go into the black community and hang out. That's definitely a challenge trying to hang out with them and feel comfortable.
3. I don't know [it was hard for me] and then like my kids are bi-racial too, so I always feel like I need to talk to my son about both because he's both, so he's gonna have White people that pick on him cause he's African American and White and then he's gonna have some Black people pick on him because he's African American and White.
4. [made to feel different] Yeah or I shouldn't be who I am really ... or like it was a problem, who I am, which made me who I am today. Like now, cause now I have feelings, but I don't ... I cry, but I don't ... I cry if it has to do with me, but other than that, if it's not something that touches my heart, I'm not crying and that's the life because of the life I had. It's almost like, no love, you know?

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We Are the  
Bridge

1. I can still be a Black man; the world is never going to let me forget that. AND work with people of other races and cultures to make things better.
  2. I think the only two groups in our hometown, that I remember were not social equals, were people that were from the LGBT community and Muslims. So as a kid, I was very adamant about everybody being treated alright and extremely so; I mean to the point where I'd get in arguments on behalf of those two groups.
  3. I think that really came about because of you know my upbringing. My mom always tried to, you know, integrate me with [other ethnicities]...she helped me see people as people...for who they are.
-

## Theme 2: Put Up or Shut Up

This theme encompasses descriptions from the participants on their experience of the opinions of others regarding their transracial adoption. These opinions are from outsiders about TRA when they would not, or could not, adopt, or care for, their Black family member or other foster children. One stated, “I would hear comments like ‘your mom only did that so she can get paid’.” Another recounted their experience of meeting their biological family and hearing “we knew about you for years we just didn’t have the money to take care of you.” Additional experiences include:

Yeah, she was a drug addict. She left me and my brother in the house for days and that’s how we were found, by a neighbor. We’d probably be dead; actually, a couple more days in that house alone and we would have been.

I never really grew up with any like positive male role models in my life at all until, you know, I met my adoptive Dad. Like, that was all; that was what changed a lot for me. My biological father would always have something negative to say...like, my father, my biological father, would say, ‘oh yeah, yeah I’ll be there, I’ll be there’ and then he wouldn’t show up, you know. Meanwhile, my dad was there. Like you can’t beat that, you know what I mean? You cannot beat that, so that made me feel like or that made me realize that no man can ever make up any excuse for not seeing his kids.

She was always like ‘this is my daughter. I don’t care what you have to say; she is going to be my daughter regardless’ or uh like people would ask her ‘what made you adopt a Black person?’ and she would say ‘why couldn’t it just be what made you adopt period’. And she was like, everybody needs love....and it is what it is. My aunt would be like ‘Oh, well what made you adopt her and her brother at the same time?’ and she was like

‘why would you wanna break up a brother and sister; especially ones that went through as much as they went through just before the age of four’.

The only source of contention has been with my some of my biological family members on my mom’s side. One of my sisters, who is also bi-racial, she’s African American and Mexican American I think, she was very opposed to the adoption, and I think she said, ‘you’ve been colonized mentally in a certain way’, which I can’t rule that out... I wouldn’t say colonized; I’ve never been subservient; I’ve never been docile...you know I’ve never been like that, but she said ‘they stripped you of your culture; they instilled self-hate’ which they never did, they did the best they could. I don’t know where I would be if it wasn’t for my adoptive parents.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (Stevenson, 2010), the phrase “put up or shut up”, originates from a publication in the *Ohio Marysville Tribune* in 1858. In the article, the respondent reportedly stated:

There have always been some objections, however, to every proposition I have made, some little quibble that this man Heenan has raised ... The above proposition is certainly a fair one, and no man can object to it.— Now, if he means business, let him put up, or shut up, for this is the last communication that will come from me in regard to this fellow" (BookBrowse, 2022, para 6).

This colloquialism may have originated from the field of boxing; however, the sentiment remains the same. Either take action or stop talking about it; put up or shut up.

### Theme 3: They Ain't Ready

Some participants recounted experiences of when they encountered hostility and discrimination from people in the outside community until said person saw their Caucasian family member.

My father and my brothers and I went up to Indiana. We actually went into a gas station and a White woman was actually kind of haranguing me as to why I wanted to use the bathroom. My father showed up and my father's like, he's pretty much like a suburban like white-bread Dad so to speak, and he came up and he actually had to put his hand on my shoulder and say 'son, you can get whatever you want. Go ahead and use the bathroom and come back and get some snacks alright' and the woman, her demeanor changed quickly. She was doing a little like waving like 'oh that's your dad; oh, okay go ahead and use the bathroom'. And I kinda recognized that I was like 'hmmm' and my father was like 'don't worry about it; she just was confused as to why you wanted to use it or whatever'; I definitely had to use mom and dad [in that situation].

Whereas in PLACE, in PLACE I could get into a tussle, I could get into a fight, and Mom and Dad weren't needed because they [officials] were like 'okay that's NAME; we'll figure out what's going on'. Whereas here, if I get into trouble, I have to have kind of that white representation that says like 'hey, this is our boy; like he's a good one; you don't need to get hostile with him'. Whereas I didn't need that in my hometown; that wasn't needed so, it's definitely been kind of a struggle.

Yes always, always like my mom would have to tell them I was hers when there were some comments from store clerks...me and my sister went to PLACE at PLACE. He wouldn't let her buy beer. While I was there and he, he was insinuating that she was

buying it for me. I was fourteen years old and she's like 'this is my [younger sibling]' and he, well he didn't wanna believe it. 'No [they're] not!'. She said 'yes [they] are! That's my [younger sibling] and he wouldn't sell her beer; he wouldn't let her buy beer. We had to go all the way down the street to another store.

One participant shared, "My mom was White, so there were always people looking at us or saying something." Another recounted how some members of the Caucasian parent's family "didn't approve of it" and how "the part of the family that was racist – uhm ... tried to drag me away from my mom." Despite both the legal process and the loving claim in their hearts, certain people continued to deny their claims of family relation. Even today, some people cannot seem to wrap their minds around a racially integrated family; they ain't ready.

#### **Theme 4: We All Family Here**

Participants described growing up in a culture of adoption as being helpful in developing a bicultural identity. In a place around other TRA families with mixed ethnicities and diverse communities that were open to adoption and adoptive families. A participant described how they were "able to have certain interactions and move through [PLACE] in a way that most other African Americans could not in other cities" and contributed that experience to "growing up with other transracial families". Another stated, "since day one, they all took me in with welcome, loving arms you know what I mean?" A fellow participant shared a similar statement, "they [family and community members] always made me feel included." While another shared, "They're very respectful people, very loving people and everybody knew that; the town that we lived in was a very close net community". This sense of belonging was further emphasized by acts of claiming:



My older adoptive brother, when he came to my high school graduation...cause it showed that you know HE cared.

My adoptive dad ...he use to take us all fishing, like literally on old property that he lived on when he was growing up, you know ... like introducing me to his history and like his upbringing and where he came from... that bonding was everything.

Like yo, this man who has no blood ties to me, cares about me, and has shown me the upmost love that a man can show another man and I just never had that you know what I mean.

I think from them I learned ... I just felt so comfortable. I felt so loved because they made me feel like I had a stronger support system.

The sense of belonging to a community that felt like family appears to have contributed to one participant's overall human experience: "I could focus and that was the weird part, you know and there wasn't that focus on race so I could focus on things that most children should be able to focus on: school, extra-curricular activities, dating... so with race out of the equation, I had pretty much a normal life in my opinion." After all, we all family here.

### **Theme 5: Stuck Between Two Worlds; Part of Both, Claimed by Neither**

Participants shared experiences of not always understanding the unspoken rules when engaging with others from African American and Caucasian ethnicities. Some identified othering behaviors masked by acceptance and a phenomenon of conditional inclusion when interacting with family and peers.

The way I talk, the way I dress, and the fact that my parents are White, that's very non-threatening to people. So, people that are White might go 'oh, we can make an exception for NAME'.

Meet a group of girls, nine out of ten times those girls are just interested in them [White adoptive siblings]. You know so, and I know how some, some White girls can be shaky about that cause some women do judge a book by its cover, because I'm Black' they might not wanna talk to me. You know, so as I like to say [to my Caucasian siblings], 'I might not always be the best wing man for you (laughing)'.

[Barriers in relating to other people] "Well their experience, their outlook on life, and uh their upbringing. So, I've moved around Florida; I've read up on certain issues. I've had to re-examine my life; I've had to re-examine my beliefs and not everybody's done that. I think one of the biggest over-arching themes that I've encountered is people subtly tell me like, 'you need to stay in your lane'. So, when I talk to people that are White here sometimes, I say, 'well in PLACE I can do this, this and this' and it doesn't seem like 'oh wow that sounds really empowering'; It sounds like 'oh wow you're a threat; you're not making me feel comfortable; you should stay in your lane'. And people don't say it; they don't go like you know 'you're an uppity this and this'. They pretty much go 'that's really weird' or if they're, particularly, if they're a White female, they go 'well we're not in PLACE are we. We don't live in PLACE, do we? We live in PLACE right, so get with the times' and there's that subtle hostility that I get just from my upbringing, and I've had family members tell me 'since you're not in PLACE, tell people you were raised by Whites and they might back off a little'.

As a kid I never learned those social distinctions. I didn't know that there were certain activities that I wasn't supposed to know about, or to do, or take part in. There were things I took for granted I didn't know that there were certain areas that you are not supposed to go.

I was like fifteen and I went up North to our family reunion and when I walked up, I heard her mom whisper something to my sister and when I went inside, my sister's White too, so when I went inside my sister was like 'she just told me to put her purse up, cause you just got here'. My sister was like 'uh uh; we're not gonna have this here. She gonna have to leave' and then she made a huge scene and then they ended up telling my mom's mom to leave.

I mean, I think one of the biggest things is just forming social relationships. Whereas before, in PLACE, like whenever I'd go to a dance I didn't go 'am I too dark? Are my features too black?

Some described experiences when individual African Americans, or themselves, appeared to challenge or question the authenticity of the participant's Blackness:

When I dated a Black dude, it was... I always felt it was different. I always felt like he was always trying to make me Blacker or something. It felt like he thought there was something lacking, like I wasn't enough. Cause like his family is at the cookouts and the drinking and the hanging out and even the way that they talk. His family would be like 'why you talk like that'?

I didn't have the big butt, or dress nice, or the good hair, or the weave, or anything like that. I was the Black girl that hung out with the White girls that dressed White so they always, always, I always got picked on.

Well I think one of the biggest things is you have to be patient so I've definitely come across people in the African American community that have said, you know 'you're an idealist and uh you need to be more pragmatic and learn how the world works' and I

think one of my biggest sources of frustration was taking my view of the world from PLACE and bringing it with me and not understanding.

I would go certain places and because of some of the stuff I wear, because of the way I speak, I think people [were like] what is he coming up to me for, you know. From my world view I'm like oh well you're wearing the same Star Wars shirt I am; I'm eager to talk to you. : So, I mean, I was just really naïve, so I'd come up and I'd approach people or I'd do certain things that were kind of out of place.

But it's like with my bi-racial daughter with her edges and dry scalp. Trying to braid her hair or even just trying to do it; that's one thing I definitely wished I would have learned. I mean, it's fine, it doesn't...it's no skin off my back. I don't care, but I mean, you know it does, it does, at times and it's like, it can be depressing.

Participants also identified experiences of defending against overgeneralizing and polarization:

We're gonna go back and forth on this (laughter) like, the whole white person is the devil and stuff, like, we're gonna go back and forth; they're not all like that.

At some point my mother and father, I think it was 2016 or 2015, said there is racism. So, and that kind of shattered my view of the world, so things became more polarized.

You gotta learn to pick your battles cause you're going up against something bigger than yourself. This is not ten thousand people in a town; this is millions, three hundred something million people, this is systemic.

One of the things I encountered as a trans-racial adoptee has been a lot of hostility because I've never really encountered segregation, I've never encountered colorism. I am what most people call an over-optimist.

Nobody really cares so those two things really solidified my sense of self but that would later lead to some conflict when I moved out of my town because not everybody shares that sentiment that you know; live and let live.

And I always, even to this day, defend white people with black people because they, the black people, have got these white people categorized as one person.

It's a struggle because there's an overarching sense of racial superiority you have to deal with and when you have a strong [identity] and when you are from a different area of the world, and you bring your ideologies that are foreign to everybody else, you're gonna encounter a lot of resistance and that's one thing that I've struggled with, you know; I have a lot of pride.

People have said, has there been a shift between your view of whites from when you were young to now and I go, I wouldn't say a shift but I, I definitely think that I'm recognizing the disparities I guess in the race relations from what I've experienced as a kid to now.

In some instances, there were inquiries on motivations behind the manifestation of Whiteness and statements, or implications of self-hate, by other members of the African American community:

Younger kids [African American] growing up was never a problem. It was always just, 'you speak different', or 'you talk White'....or 'why do you talk like that'. Or something like that and I never even really noticed that there was a difference, but I guess now it's not that I talk White, it's just proper.

Why are you trying to be accepted by them [White people]?

Also, I have friends from back home who when I was dating White women, as soon as they heard that, the Black girls they (sucked lips) they all do all that. I'm just like YO! WHAT! Black girls are getting M.A.D They all like, 'All your self-hatred; you hate yourself'. I'm like WHAT!

Why you date White boys? You act White, you only date White boys and all that cause you were adopted by White people.

For the participants of this study, there appears to be this experience of living in two worlds. A tension between learning, maintaining, and manifesting ethnic and cultural practices for both the minoritized and dominate cultures, while also struggling with feelings of inauthenticity. These participants appeared to have experienced both acceptance and nonacceptance from members of the African American and Caucasian communities. This concept of acceptance became a constant dance between othering and inclusive behaviors that can be described as being stuck between both worlds; part of both but claimed by neither.

### **Theme 6: We are the Bridge**

This final theme contains experiences of integration, joining, and hope. Participants speak of becoming a "cultural medium" and serving as a "bridge between cultures". One participant described a conversation with her Black in-laws regarding her son's manner of speech:

Even correcting my son when he speaks in front of them. They'll say, 'Why did you need to correct him' and I'm all like cause he needs to speak right, what do you mean? He's gotta end his sentences with a period and he's gotta sound like he knows what's up. He doesn't need to be like 'what it do' or 'where it come from' or 'where that be' and stuff like that. He needs to learn how to speak the way that he needs to speak or he's gonna be in school and not know what he's talking about; he needs to learn both ways.

Some shared experiences of serving as the intermediary for the minoritized and dominant cultural experiences:

And when I'd go back to PLACE I would tell my friends about what I saw, so I was kind of a bridge because the kids in PLACE never really experienced life outside of it.

I told somebody, I told one of my friends, jokingly, I said 'you know there's radical Abolitionist and radical Republicans; I'm a radical Integrationalist'. So, he said 'you know, you might wanna get a suit and sideburns and you'll look like Fredrick Douglas' (laughter).

I've read certain literature and I think it's very frustrating because just the spirit of integration is very strong with me. I have no drive to right wrongs in a Militant sense, but one of my biggest things has been maintaining my own dignity.

It appears an outcome for these participant's experience of TRA is one of acceptance and hope.

I am who I am. I consider myself very unique so, I'm like very loving. I give everyone a chance. Everyone has a chance to be your friend or someone in your life and uh accept everyone for who they are and that's what I do.

In PLACE interracial relationships (clap of hands) were normal, but also you could date within your race nobody really cared.

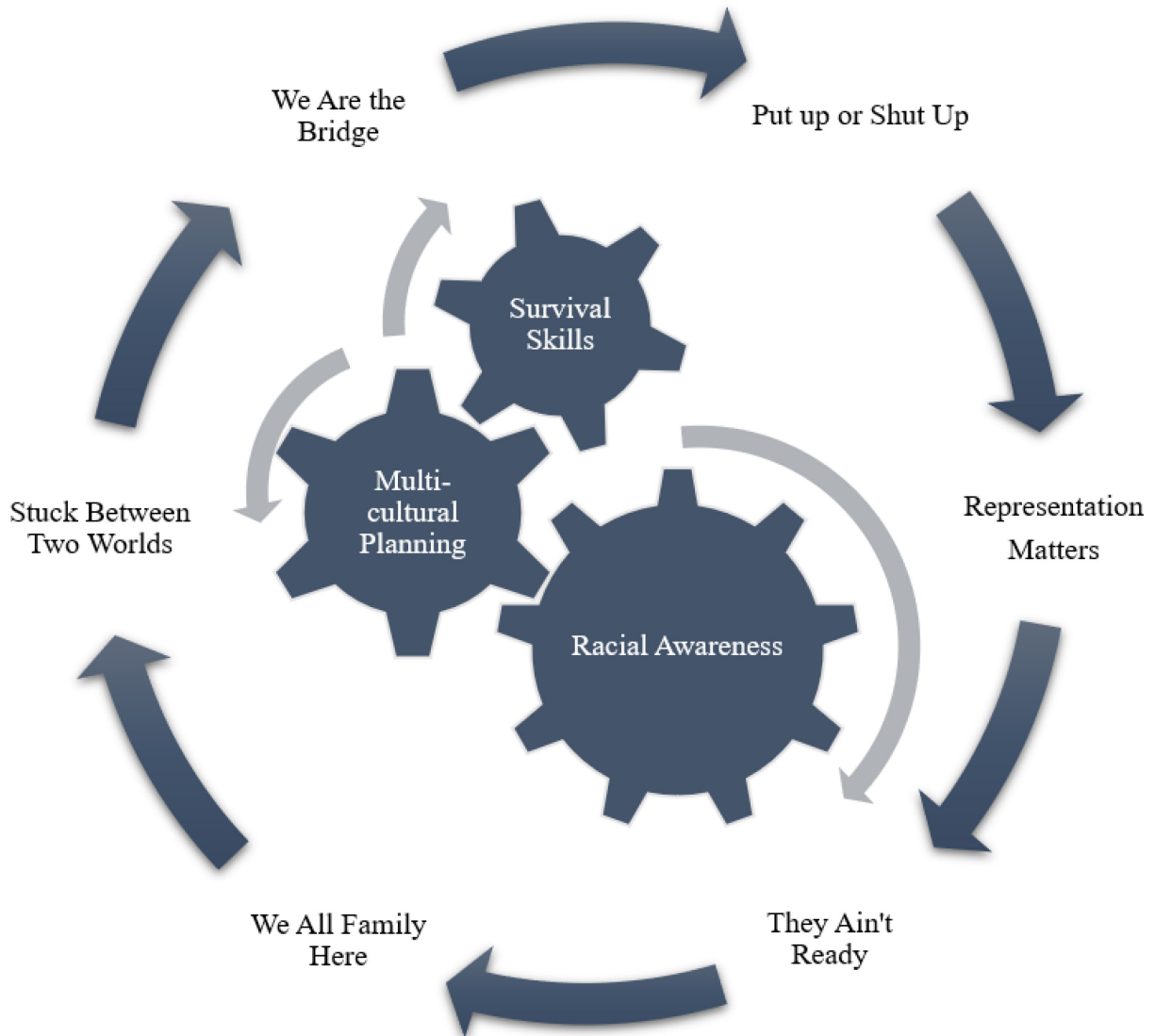
The statements of "seeing people as people for who they are" and reported incidents of "integration with other ethnicities", highlights a perceived experience of linking. This perception appears further reflected in the statement "I can still be a Black man...AND work with people of other races and cultures to make things better; to be the bridge."

## **Thematic Process**

When parents adopt transracially, they and their children are vulnerable to additional difficulties and stressors that can have negative impacts on self-esteem and identity development (deHaymes & Simon, 2003; Vonk, 2001; Vonk et al., 2010; White & Wanless, 2019). Three critical areas of cultural competence for transracial adoptive parenting have been identified in the professional literature: racial awareness, multicultural planning, and survival skills (Vonk, 2001). Racial awareness is defined as “self-awareness of one’s own experiences and attitudes regarding race and difference; awareness of the roles that race, ethnicity, and culture play in children’s development; and understanding of the importance of these issues in fostering a child’s positive identity development” (Vonk, 2001, p. 249). Multicultural Planning refers to the process in which families “create ways for children to learn about their racial/ethnic groups and access relationships and experiences that afford children opportunities for positive identity development” (Vonk, 2001, p. 249).

Survival skills are the specific skills that the parents and child(ren) of color learn to cope successfully with racial prejudice and in overcoming discrimination (Vonk, 2001). The previously discussed themes of this study describe the participants’ experience of transracial adoption, while the following section reviews the process of how the integration of identified socialization behaviors, combined with the emergent themes and the identified areas of cultural competence for transracial adoptive parenting, contributed to the development towards a positive bicultural identity (see Figure 4.1).



**Figure 4.1***Integrated Thematic Model for Positive Bicultural Identity Development*

The themes *Representation Matters* and *They Ain't Ready* align with the identified aspects of the parental cultural competence category of racial awareness. Included in *Representation Matters* are events and notions of inclusivity and exposure to diversity. *They Ain't ready* includes experiences of the parents'/siblings' actions of protection and defense when the adoptee encountered prejudice, discrimination, and microaggressions. The second category

of parental competence is multicultural planning, which can be observed in the overarching sense of inclusivity and the reported statements of claiming activities represented in the *We All Family Here* theme. *Put up or Shut up*, another theme in the multicultural planning category, includes judgements and biases from other family and community members regarding the act of adopting transracially. These themes in the multicultural planning category speak to the defense of autonomy and the parents' right to choose the construction of their immediate family members.

The final parental competence category, survival skills, includes the themes *Stuck Between Two Worlds; Part of Both, Claimed by Neither* and *We are the Bridge*. The themes of this category represent the process of cultural frame switching and the experience of navigating dominant White American and minoritized Black American cultures. The combination of the 6 emergent themes and the 3 areas of parental cultural competency appear to reflect how the identified lived experiences shaped identity development in the participants of this study.

The reported socialization behaviors that serve as manifestations of racial awareness, multicultural planning, and survival skills and contributions to the emergent themes are presented in the following constructed themes: Ancillary Supports, Extracurricular Activities, Open Dialogue, Application of Cultural Awareness in Parenting, and Literature and Films (see Table 4.2). The participants of this study described these socialization behaviors as activities that were helpful and as resources during times of distress.

Ancillary Supports are the people who provided non-parental support throughout the TRA's experience. For these participants, the identified supports included: teachers, therapists, mentors, adoptive siblings, and members of the adoptive community. Extracurricular activities, such as scouting organizations and JROTC, also allowed the TRA to connect with supportive

individuals and experience socialization opportunities with peers. Some participants described their experience of engaging in conversations, open dialogues, with their parents:

[Regarding comfort with the transracial adoption] She was just so welcoming, and I feel like some White people would be uncomfortable around you, uncomfortable to talk around you, or talk about things with you, but she was always like ‘we can talk about anything.’ That would happen; it’s just, I just felt so comfortable talking to her.

The application of cultural awareness in parenting and child rearing practices is an additional socialization behavior for the participants of this study. One participant shared: “So one of the biggest things that she [adoptive mom] taught me was gender stereotypes are wrong; racial stereotypes too. That really solidified my sense of self.” Another disclosed: “My mother kind of brought that cultural sense of well, you know ‘you like country and you like Star Wars and if anybody says otherwise tell them, go kick rocks!’” Another described their perception from a very young age and the beginning days of joining the family: “Like from the jump, like she was not closed...she was very instrumental in exposing me to other cultures.” The following encounter was with an ancillary support, an older Caucasian adoptive sister; yet it also encompasses the application of cultural awareness:

Like when I drove to Vegas, my sister printed out all the directions and everything and at the bottom, she made a paragraph. And I was like ‘because I have a gun?’ She’s like ‘I know you’re gonna be traveling with your gun, you need to do this if you get pulled over.’ She had to put that in there. If you get pulled over as soon as the cop comes up to your door, make sure you let them know that there is a gun in the car. Make sure you do not reach for anything. Make sure you don’t say anything wrong. Make sure you say ‘Sir’ and ‘thank you ma’am’, gosh... and then she was like ‘I know it seems weird that I am

telling you to talk like this or be like this, but it's sad to say, but the world that we live in right now, anything can happen no matter how good you try to make it.' And it is so true. The constructed them of literature and films in the socialization behaviors is a manifestation of the emergent theme *Representation Matters*. Here, participants describe how reading about and watching others non-traditional and/or interracial families contributed to their identity development. "I saw Snow Dogs one time and it had Cuba Gooding Junior and his dad was White and his mom was Black (clap of hands), and I was like thank you!" "We watched Jurassic Park one time, it was the second one with Jeff Goldblum, and he had a bi-racial daughter in the movie."

I remember we watched *Tarzan* one time and as you know, Tarzan was adopted, so my parents said, 'look he's different; he's adopted'. So, I think some of that media helped me you know, like, maintain a sense of pride because I was like 'oh that guy is different'.

**Table 4.2***Identified Socialization Behaviors*

Socialization Behaviors	Significant Statements
Ancillary Supports	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. There was a lot of therapy.</li> <li>2. I've seen a therapist since I was eight.</li> <li>3. I had mentors.</li> <li>4. Having siblings who care about you, that are your age; people that you can just talk to and vibe with, I think that is huge.</li> <li>5. My parents had positive interactions with Black people that might have influenced them when they were adopting.</li> <li>6. ... Well, a lot a L..O..T of people in that community are adopted.</li> </ol>
Extracurricular Activities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. My parents put me in activities like scouting.</li> <li>2. They put me in activities like JROTC [Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps]; they socialized me.</li> </ol>
Open Dialogue	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I mean she [adoptive mother] keeps it real. I mean we have always had real conversations you know what I mean.</li> <li>2. I definitely talked to my parents.</li> </ol>
Application of Cultural Awareness in Parenting	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. You need parents that are kind of well read.</li> <li>2. I think there needs to be a moderate view on race if you have parents that wanna adopt trans-racially and there needs to be a healthy way of informing kids of their culture.</li> <li>3. I think people need to understand that if they really wanna have a healthy relationship where the kid does not kind of rebel, or have hatred, or animosity, then they need to have that cultural connection.</li> </ol>
Literature and Films	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. They would give me literature because they said, 'we can't teach you to be a strong Native American and we can't teach you how to be a strong black man, but what we can do, is teach you how to be a good man'.</li> <li>2. I've had to read books I don't know if you've read Robin DiAngelo's uh <i>White Fragility</i>.</li> <li>3. I've read <i>Black Masks</i>, uh what is it <i>White Mask Black Faces</i>.</li> <li>4. I think I just watched a lot of films.</li> </ol>

### **From Their Mouths to Your Eyes: Direct Messages from the Participants**

Different associations, agencies and groups have been debating for over 35 years about the appropriateness of transracial adoption. Some proponents for transracial adoption maintain that transracial adoption meets the psychosocial and developmental needs of these children and does not produce psychological or social maladjustment. While some opponents of transracial adoption stress the importance of racial socialization for minority children and argue that this systematic dismantling of African American families and the resulting placement of Black children in Caucasian homes is cultural genocide. I named my dissertation study “Beyond the Controversy” because it is time to move past the debate and support and uplift the voices that are often lost in this argument: the African American adoptee. In an effort to honor that intent, I included this section as an additional way to create space and uplift the voices of the adoptee. I asked each participant the following questions: *What message would you like others to know about transracial adoption? What about for parents, do you have any lasting message for White parents that are looking to adopt Black children?* The next sections are their responses.

The following are responses from the participants in response to the question “*What message would you like others to know about transracial adoption?*”

It’s amazing. Don’t ever frown upon it. Really, don’t ever wanna not do it just because they’re a different color or something like that. Enjoy who you really are and don’t ever feel a certain way or anything like that. And to my other Black adoptees, everyone needs love, so it’s not that the White people didn’t want to adopt you, or the Black people didn’t want to adopt you, everyone’s different... everyone lives a different life too so, yeah, try to just accept who you are and you know you won’t really have problems with everyone else. If they don’t love you for you, then just walk away.

I think it's beneficial. I think if you've raised the child with a sense of pride and the adoptive family's heritage and also the child's biological family and their lineage, I think you can pretty much bridge cultural gaps. I think that's one thing that someone told me; they said 'you're a cultural bridge. You've taken elements of Black culture, you understand it, you're half Native American, and you've lived with White people. You've lived in areas where you have to interact with White people, so you're a cultural medium'.

I'd have to say that trans-racial adoption, contrary to popular belief, does not really cause harm if you do it in the right way. I think it can bridge cultural differences if you do it the right way.

Basically, get used to it! It's 2019 now and almost 2020! It's gonna be more bi-racial kids; there's gonna be more inter-racial relationships, there's gonna be more transracial adoptions. Not because people wanna see their families look alike, but because people wanna help out kids that are in need. I think it's important that people just get used to it; for real, that's the only message really I got...and don't do drugs (laughter).

The following are responses from the participants to White parents looking to adopt Black children:

Love them. Really, just love them and always let them know that it doesn't matter if they're Black or White; they were loved. Like, I always felt like my [biological] mom, why'd she you know ...why'd she give us away or something like that... I felt like she just didn't want us. Sometimes I feel like my White mom only adopted us so she could feel better about herself for adopting black kids, but that was never the case. She just always believed that everybody needs love, so teach them how to be both and love them.

Don't let anyone talk down on your kids and protect them publicly.

I just think that, uh, the one thing that really stood out to me, that's really pushed me into History and Sociology has been what my parents told me and they said, 'we didn't see a Black kid; we didn't see a Native American or a bi-racial kid; we saw a kid that was lost in the system'. My parents took something from the Negro College Foundation and told me about it and I've just kept it in the back of my mind at all times and it's "A Mind is a Terrible Thing to Waste" and I think anyone that really wants to adopt, uh need to just keep that in the forefront of their mind. They need to realize that first and foremost you're taking in a child and I, I think that really has stood out to me and has uh pushed me to uh pursue I wouldn't say social justice but social improvement overall. Make sure they get a side [an experience] of both worlds don't just give'em that one side.

Open your kids' eyes to the world; make them feel as comfortable as possible by introducing them to the world. Be open to judging a person by their behaviors and their presence, not by their color; don't let color define you or your ability to connect with others. Make that child aware of their surroundings and their history. Regardless of whether the Black child that's adopted, its parents are Black, White, Asian whatever the case may be, they are still gonna grow up with the hardships of being African American; no matter what. Teach them, you know, not to judge a book by its cover, but also teach them that they may also be judged and how to handle that. If they were to nip it in the butt earlier, it would be a much better outcome. If they were to nip things like that in the butt earlier, where they could teach kids that are bi-racial or adopted by bi-racial parents or same sex parents that things most likely will come up at some point in their lives



where they will be judged by what they look like, who they hang out with and then teach them how to cope with that; how to deal with that when the time comes instead of it being a whole new thing and it's like BOOM it happens and it's like WOAHH, like I wasn't prepared for that like what just happened. But, you know, I just feel like if people are more prepared for it when the time comes, it'll be easier; it won't cause stress you know, if you nip these things in the butt early.

Make sure if you are a White person adopting a Black individual (hits the table) definitely make sure that that person sees the Black side, the African American side; make sure they get both.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The voices of the families that have successfully raised transracially adopted children with a positive cultural identity are missing from the literature: “Further research is needed on adoption from the perspective of the adoptee” (Clark et al., 2006, p. 192). Additionally, there are methodological shortcomings that inhibit our ability to definitively determine adjustment outcomes for this population. Such shortcomings, combined with a failure to address additional variables that influence outcomes, have left identified gaps in the research unaddressed. The purpose of this study is to explore the experience of TRA and discover how Caucasian families utilize cultural socialization behaviors to promote a positive bicultural identity within their transracially adopted African American children.

The desire to effect change by addressing social justice issues in our society is an acknowledged description of the secondary gains inherent to the implementation of this research study. It is my intent to establish myself as a researcher committed to issues of social justice, advocacy, and the equality of human rights, while also presenting multiple viewpoints on how these aspects reflect the emergent nature of reality. I attempted to suspend judgments regarding the development of a positive cultural identity by engaging in a critical analysis of my own presuppositions. Use of a personal journal and memoing throughout the research process helped with this critical analysis and allowed for further reflection regarding my experience of studying another person’s experience of transracial adoption. I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge how my social constructivist perspective is shaping how I engage with this data and the resulting consciousness that continues to question the intersectional aspect of identity development.

## **Increasing Representation**

Participants of this study describe the importance of the presence of BIPOC while growing up with their Caucasian families. The concept of representation appears global in that it spans the various minoritized identities. The absence of representation and access to BIPOC denies the TRA the behavioral reinforcement necessary to the development of their racial identity. According to Brown and colleagues (2008), this process of behavioral reinforcement includes behavioral displays, such as smiles, laughter, and the prolonged engagement in topics that are viewed as legitimate interests for Blacks. Participants of this study described experiences at school where “going to an elementary school that was mostly Black” and having friends at school that “would fill me in on the cultural nuances of being Black” helped with identity development. Consistent with social learning frameworks, the participant’s experience of this behavior display contributed to the process of learning how to be Black by watching the behaviors of peers (Hughes et al., 2011).

Results from this study support the notion that race is a central aspect of the child’s identity. Participants described the importance of race consciousness and how the ignorance of racial hierarchies contributed to difficulties in socializing with others. These results further mirror the findings from Feigelman (2000) in that the TRAs of this study also reported experiences of adjustment difficulties and greater discomfort regarding their physical appearance. As I engaged with the participants, I became very curious about the noted integration of mentors and how the parents openly acknowledged their limitations regarding the teachings and implementation of African American culture practices. The Caucasian parents of this study appear to have addressed these limitations and set the foundation for the development of positive ethnic identity by integrating literature and films, ancillary supports, extracurricular

activities, and by utilizing open dialogues as the vehicle for manifesting and growing cultural awareness.

The constructed theme of *Representation Matters* also applies to the development of self-image and the TRA's acceptance of their physical attributes. According to Lee and Quintana (2005), children are aware of physical racial differences by age 4 and begin to see themselves through the eyes of others and understand the dynamics of racial group membership by age 9. It is during this time that children learn to negotiate, define, and discriminate themselves from others. They define likenesses and differences in concrete ways (eyes, skin color, skill, strengths). When differences are noticed, the child may feel inferior and as if they do not belong. Jungian psychology describes this Ugly Duckling theme as a spiritual root story that contains the fundamental truth about human development. I cannot know what went on in the young minds of my participants as they grappled with this phenomenon in the process of developing their identity; however, through their words and the recounting of their lived experience, it is evident that increasing representation is a foundational piece in promoting the development of a positive bicultural identity.

### **Rising to the Occasion**

The theme *Put up or Shut Up*, while colloquial in nature, represents a call to action rather than the furthering of unsupportive, negative opinions that seek to tear down TRA families. As helping professionals, it is our honor and ethical responsibility to provide psychoeducation, therapeutic supports, and culturally competent interventions to assist these families in lessening the cultural divide so they may rise to the occasion of rearing independent and psychologically well individuals. The families of this study were reportedly vocal regarding their defense of and belief in the construction of their TRA family. For them, rising to the occasion involved

multicultural planning, a process of creating methods for their child to learn about racial/ethnic groups and access relationships and experiences that afforded their child opportunities for positive identity development (Vonk, 2001).

This process of multicultural planning appears present in other studies. Pahlke et al. (2012) conducted a study to examine European American parents' racial socialization, specifically with mothers and their preschool aged children, regarding children's racial biases. Results from this study indicated that mothers with a higher percentage of non-white friends had children with more positive attitudes towards African Americans. The subjective evidence assembled from the interviews of this study reflect a similar outcome. Participants each described not only the importance of community, but how that community became an extension of their family.

### **Manifesting Readiness**

*Conspicuous family* is a term used in adoption circles for a family that does not pass in society as biologically related because the adopted child is of a different race than the adoptive parents. However, the visual appearance of the family system continues to grow beyond the same race, same culture archetype. The expansion of the family archetype extends beyond TRA families and can also be found in interracial families with biological connections. In the theme *They Ain't Ready*, certain members of the extended family and of the community continued to deny claims to familial relation when faced with the differences in skin color. While some may struggle with cognitive dissonance in relation to this inclusive representation of family, it is time for advocates and helping professionals to assist in manifesting readiness for the presence of racially integrated families. Representatives from the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute advocate for ways to increase color consciousness and have transformative conversations to

ensure positive identity development for all members of the family, especially for the child who has been adopted into a family whose race, class and culture may differ from their family of origin (Dinwoodie, 2016).

### **Family x 3**

The theme *We All Family Here* mirrors the results found in studies regarding positive adoptive outcomes and psychological well-being. One participant identified the ability to focus on other milestone developments and experiences of the human condition “with race out of the equation”. In reflection, I became curious about a possible distinction between color blindness and the reduction of attention given to race. While race is an important factor, could it be for this participant and their family, the parents and community members were able to balance race with other important areas of identity development? The Cognitive Developmental Model of Social Identity Integration (CDSMII) identified feelings of threat and status/power asymmetries as inhibitors to identity development and integration (Amiot et al., 2007). This model also identified coping, adaptation, and social supports as facilitators of identity development and integration (Amiot et al., 2007). It appears that within the context of change throughout the participants’ life transitions, the presence of family and the identified facilitators, combined with minimal, or absence of, inhibitors, contributed to positive identity integration.

It was through the voice of one of her characters that fiction author Sherrilyn Kenyon provided a quote about the concept of families. Simi, the fictional character, reminds us that “we have three kinds of family. Those we are born to, those who are born to us, and those we let into our hearts” (Kenyon, 2010, p. 461). An aspect of this family x3 is represented in the adoption triad of the child, the birth family, and the adoptive family. The adoptive family, and the community that the family is situated in, represents the family we let into our hearts. One

participant stated, “I think from them I learned ... I just felt so comfortable. I felt so loved because they made me feel like I had a stronger support system” when speaking about their family of the heart. The birth family was present, in differing amounts and at different stages of development, for each of the participants of this study. However, this presence, along with the acceptance of the adoptive family, and the community members, appears to have contributed to positive identity development and a deeper experience of the word *family*.

### **Claiming Both Worlds**

For the participants of this study, there appears to be tension between learning, maintaining, and manifesting ethnic and cultural practices for both the minoritized and dominate cultures, while also struggling with feelings of inauthenticity. This experience of both acceptance and nonacceptance from members of the African American and Caucasian communities and feelings of inauthenticity are similar to experiences identified in Butler-Sweet (2014). For the participants in Butler-Sweet (2014), authentic Blackness encapsulated urban street culture, slang, hip-hop, and lower socioeconomic status; characteristics that do not describe their lived experiences or how they self-identify. These results further support the importance of understanding how transracial adoptees develop a sense of community and conceptualize their cultural, ethnic, and racial group membership. Such conceptualizations carry great meaning regarding self-concept, self-worth, and familial integration of self.

The concept of acceptance, both of self and in the respective communities, became a constant dance between othering and inclusive behaviors that can be described as being stuck between both worlds; part of both but claimed by neither. Peer pressure is the attempt to shape the attitudes or behavior of another person (Brown et al., 2008). In this model of socialization, peers attempt to persuade the youth to accept the group’s values and beliefs of what it means to

be Black. Unlike peer pressure, antagonistic behaviors do not include directives for preferred behaviors when the youth displays views or actions that are inconsistent with being Black (Brown et al., 2008). These behaviors can be playful, such as teasing or mild ridiculing, or more aggressive, such as bullying, threatening, or relational aggression (Brown et al., 2008).

Participants described experiences of antagonistic behaviors from members of both minoritized and dominant communities that attempted to further cement contextually dependent identities.

According to Yoon (2001), ethnic pride is related to higher well-being and lower stress. One participant recounted their experience with their biological aunt's mention of erasure and how it contributed to the adoptive family's ability to accept this participant. As I listened, I could feel the tension between what their mom's sister would say about erasure and the stripping of their culture and the recounting of their adoptive grandmother's statement, *I don't look at you as Black. You are White; you are [adopted family's culture]*. In the meaning making process of accepting the participant as her grandson, this adoptive grandmother appeared to engage in a removal of the participant's race and ethnicity as part of her process of claiming him as her family. The participant acknowledged the tension in balancing the knowledge from these experiences and how it contributed to additional stress and confusion in his process of identity development. According to Zamostny and colleagues (2003), the act of adoption influences the way developmental tasks are approached and can trigger psychological themes, such as rejection, grief, shame, and identity confusion. Efforts to minimize the presence of these aversive effects and support claiming both worlds may include activities that promote ethnic pride and support in realizing that their multiple identities are simultaneously important to their overall definition of self.



## **Crossing the Bridge**

The National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) states, “Those born of Black-White alliances are no longer Black as decreed by immutable law and social custom for centuries. They are now Black-White, inter-racial, bi-racial, emphasizing the Whiteness as the adoptable quality...” (U.S. GAO, 2007). However, according to Simon and Roorda (2009), these transracial children “have the potential for becoming catalysts for society in general” (p. 9). According to intergroup social theorists, both differentiation of self into distinct components and the similarities between these components are necessary for integration (Amiot et al., 2007; Rafaeli-Mor & Steinberg, 2002). Additionally, when identities become integrated and organized within the global self-structure, the connection and links between the different self-components feel cohesive and become simultaneously important to the overall concept of self (Amiot et al., 2007). If TRAs are becoming the catalysts for society with the potential to develop, organize, and integrate their identities to experience a cohesive, global self, to become the bridge as it were, then it is for the rest of us to find ways to promote respect, acceptance, and to support the necessary social change to cross the bridge.

The assumptions of self-categorization theory (SCT) are based on the principles of metacontrast and normative fit, meaning that, in order for a specific social identity to become salient, the intergroup differences need to be greater than the intragroup differences (metacontrast principle; Turner et al., 1987) and the objective differences between groups must match the expected stereotypical features of these groups (normative fit principle; Turner et al., 1987). Group members acquire and maintain a positive social identity through a process of social competition and discrimination (Amiot et al., 2007). "Contextually shifting between salient identities and behaviors ('frame switching') is in itself an efficient way to manage one's

different cultural identities" (Yampolsky et al., 2016, p. 169). The fact that multicultural individuals can identify exclusively with one cultural group or identify across cultural groups depending on the social context of the situation only further demonstrates the intricate and multilayered complexity of identity formation for the participants of this study.

Many TRA participants suggested that Caucasian parents be sensitive to racial issues when considering adopting transracially. The way parents recognize and treat race as socially meaningful is known as racial assignment (Quiroz, 2014). The extent of this recognition appeared to influence how Caucasian adoptive parents of this study chose to socialize their African American children. Quiroz (2014) describes these children as neo-ethnics who have learned the performance of Whiteness from their parents and have developed new identities that reflect the intersection of race, class, sexuality, gender, and adoption status. By educating these parents, helping professionals are providing an opportunity for change that will spread to other areas of their lives. This is one of the ways we, as a profession, can promote and support social change.

### **Integrative Cultural Socialization**

Socialization is a developmental task and the results of this study reinforce the importance of parents providing developmentally appropriate racial socialization opportunities. Hughes et al. (2011) describe racial socialization, a component of bicultural identity formation, as a "transactional process in which parents, peers, and society impart race-related messages to children, while children select, interpret, and integrate racial messages into their burgeoning sense of self" (p. 98). According to scholars, this process of socialization is a developmental task, not a choice (Baden, 2015). Meaning, parents cannot opt out of providing developmentally appropriate racial socialization opportunities for their children. Results from this study align with

previous studies and their recommendations for integrative cultural socialization practices (McGinnis et al. 2009; Vonk et al., 2010; Vonk & Massatti, 2008).

Socialization involves “teaching [an individual] the social skills, behavior patterns, social understandings, values, and emotional maturity motivations needed to interact successfully and be a competent member of society” (Smetana, 2011, p. 173). The process of racial socialization is “the ways in which the messages that Black youth receive about the meaning and experience of being Black shape their perceptions of themselves...” (Hughes et al., 2011, p. 96). These messages come from parents, peers, family members, media, and the larger societal context in which the youth resides. Racial socialization within the family context is the process by which parent’s communicate racial knowledge (Goar, 2014). The participants of this study did not attend culture camps or other activities specifically geared towards TRA; however, they did identify other socialization behaviors that were helpful resources during times of distress.

Proactive racial socialization, protective racial socialization messages, and preparation for bias messages were also present in the constructed themes of this study (Barr and Neville 2008; Hughes et al., 2011). Proactive racial socialization messages focus on positive messages about the child, while protective socialization messages address racial barriers, counter stereotypes, and promote mistrust of Caucasian individuals (Bar and Neville, 2008). Preparation for bias messages create a sense of personal efficacy while preparing child to access coping mechanisms to address racial experiences (Hughes et al., 2011). Preparation for bias, in some ways, was missing, or not as prominent in my participant’s socialization experience. One participant stated “So, if they could have incorporated and acknowledged those areas, like racism, like different social norms based on race which are based on how other people perceive and operate outside of PLACE, then that would have been really beneficial. ”

The need for integrative socialization practices is further reinforced by the findings of McGinnis et al. (2009) and Vonk et al., (2010). According to these researchers, the TRA parents of these studies “primarily relied on socialization practices that required little to no contact with people of the child’s race/ethnicity” (Vonk et al., 2010, p. 246). The adult TRA participants of these studies, along with the participants of this study, appear to support integrative socialization practices for the development of positive racial identity and the protective factors to manage discrimination and racism.

### **Answering The Call: Implications for Policy and Practice**

American parents can utilize the services of private, or public, adoption agencies to adopt children domestically or internationally. There are subsidies and policies that promote the adoption of African American children, yet they remain overrepresented in the foster and adoptive populations and underrepresented in the number of children who have been adopted from foster care. In the case of transracial adoption, Finding families for African American children (2008) emphasizes the necessity for these children to learn the knowledge and skills to address stigma and discrimination as they navigate a racialized society. African American children adopted by White American parents were more likely to express a desire to be considered as White (as their racial classification) and reported adjustment difficulties within their communities and their own families (Butler-Sweet, 2011; Feigelman, 2000; McRoy, Zurcher, Lauderdale, & Anderson, 1984; Simon & Alstein, 2002). As a result, these researchers recommended that agencies provide adoption support for transracial families from time of placement through the children’s adolescence.

There are positive trends occurring in foster care with greater numbers of children spending less time in care (Kalisher et al., 2020). The number of adoptions of children from

foster care in the United States increased 22 percent from the periods of 2005 – 2007 to 2017 – 2019 (Kalisher et al., 2020). According to *The Multiethnic Placement Act 25 Years Later: Trends in Adoption and Transracial Adoption* report published by the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, the overall percent of transracial adoptions has increased since the implementation of MEPA in 1994 (Kalisher et al., 2020). “The portion of children adopted transracially increased from 23 percent to 28 percent overall and from 21 percent to 33 percent for Black children” (Kalisher et al., 2020, p. 4). While the increase in transracial adoption may indicate lower wait times in care for Black children, it also reinforces the need for education and resources to support this growing population.

It is time to include the voices of transracial adoptees and find ways to support the families raising individuals that could become the catalysts for creating an inclusive and equitable society. The lack of actionable knowledge for frontline professionals throughout the literature further demonstrates the gap in preparedness to meet the needs of this population. Advocates, parents, and transracial adoptees are calling for helping professionals to divest from deficit-focused models of assistance and begin implementing strength-based practices that can be standardized and adequately address the needs of this population. Vonk and Angaran (2001) suggest parents and professionals participate in training modules that include components of culture, racial awareness, multicultural planning, and survival skills for minority children. In response to this call, this study seeks to move beyond the controversy surrounding transracial placements and focus on the development of a theoretical framework that addresses the needs of this population.

Transracially adopted children have been found to score lower on racial identity measures than their in-race adoptive counterparts, which suggests that these children may struggle with

establishing a positive ethnic identity (Baden, 2007). There are few qualitative studies that involve the voices of transracial adoptees; however, when these voices are acknowledged, the adoptees report challenges with fitting in with their own family settings, their peers, and the outside community (Freundlich & Lieberthal, 2000; John, 2002; Trenka et al., 2006; Simon & Alstein, 2002). To further uplift the voices of transracial adoptees, I have included quotes from our interviews that appear to correspond with concepts and evidence presented in the current literature.

Concerns abound regarding Caucasian parents' ability to prepare minoritized children with the psychosocial tools to develop a positive ethnic identity and survive life in a racist society (Goar, 2014).

I think one of the biggest things was that I wished my parents would have kind of prepared me for what was prejudice in the world. I think that any parent looking to adopt should definitely, uh I wouldn't say take your son or daughter to a Klu Klux Klan rally, but definitely desensitize them because it can be very overwhelming [to learn about racism].

Well, I think one of the biggest things is there should be resources to where children won't have that culture shock.

I think I was fortunate in that respect; I just wish there was more preparation for life outside of there because, I told somebody it was pretty much like a post racial like T. V. show in the area I lived.

Don't just expose them to one thing and make sure you let them know that there's gonna be problems with racism and issues like that.

The body of research linking parental socialization related to race/ethnicity and child outcomes supports standards of professional practice that focus on preparing parents to assist the children they adopt transracially in positively integrating their heritage into their sense of self (Baden & Steward, 2000; Child Welfare League of America, 2000; Coakley & Orme, 2006; Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2014; Samuels, 2009; Vonk & Angaran, 2001; Yampolsky et al., 2016; Zamostny et al., 2003).

I think there needs to be resources to where a child does not have that dichotomy and just because your parents say hey be proud of who you are doesn't mean your child is gonna have that kind of epiphany.

Because when you take in a kid, at some point, you stop looking at the kid like they're Black and I think it gives you a greater sense of empathy for others. But that is where cultural training might need to come in.

Yeah, I don't make greens. I don't eat uh ... my cooking is not black so, make sure like you get the best of both worlds through all of them.

“Adoption and adoptive families will ultimately be stronger if we listen to and learn from the experiences of transracially adopted individuals” (Soojung Callahan, 2014, p. 246). The disregard or loss of ethnic identity has been associated with low self-esteem, behavioral problems, and psychological distress (Brown & Ling, 2012; Feigelman, 2000; Mohanty, 2013; Yoon, 2001).

I think there needs to be more support for that cause I've met people that are darker that have been adopted and they live in [Place] and they've talked about self-hate.

Yeah, my mom, she had no idea what to do with my hair, yeah, she didn't know what to do... that was one thing that I wished, that she could do my hair, cause really it messed up my days a lot.

I think children need to have that so they can acclimate, and I mean it's worn down my health. I mean it's worn down my mental health my physical health, so I think anyone looking to adopt might wanna look into that especially, like that eye-opening experience.

The standards used in enforcing MEPA-IEP promote a "color blind" approach to the adoption of Black children from foster care. However, when parents adopt transracially, they and their children are not well served when they do not receive preparation and training that promote racial awareness and assist them with multicultural planning and the development of survival and coping skills. Unrealistic parenting expectations and low levels of support are two predictors for the disruption of an adoption (Zamostny et al., 2003). By incorporating culturally competent helping professionals and extending social supports beyond the finalization of the adoption, we could make strides in eliminating these two risk factors. The extension of post adoption services into adolescence and beyond would present opportunities for transracial adoptive families to receive support while their children move through the developmental stages of identity formation.

The belief that adopted children would be indistinguishable from biological children, that transracial adoptive family life would proceed as it does in biological families, originates from colorblind racism and ignores the lived experience of the minoritized adoptee. According to Voice for Adoption (2009), "adoptive families report that there is a continuing need for an established set of principles for adoption-competent mental health services" (p. 4). However, due to lack of funding and the scarcity of evidence-based research on post-adoption service models,



there is little to assist with service evaluation and service model development (Voice for Adoption, 2009). Members of the Voice for Adoption (2022) coalition advocate for the following:

- The development and clear identification of best practice standards for working with adopted children and their families in post-adoption, mental health, or other service provision settings;
- The performance of outcome-based research that evaluates post-adoption service models and enhances best practice standards;
- The collaboration of Child Welfare and Medicaid agencies to support the training of mental health practitioners on these standards; and
- Provision of guidance on diligent recruitment, including requiring data collection and reporting on the racial and ethnic makeup of prospective foster and adoptive families and emphasizing the need to recruit foster and adoptive parents who reflect the racial and ethnic background of the children in foster care.

Adoptive families report multiple struggles to find and/or access adoption-competent community-based supports to meet their children's needs and stabilize their families (Voice for Adoption, 2009). The results of this study further support the need for additional resources and education for helping professionals and the communities they serve. Marriage and family therapists could answer the call and address this unintentional harm by establishing themselves as a competent and informed resource for these families. The following are some programs that offer a 64-hour curriculum, or 8-day training, on both foundational and clinical issues that arise when working with foster or adopted children and their families:

- Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey,

- Catawba County Department of Social Services, North Carolina,
- Lilliput Children's Services, Northern California,
- University of Minnesota reaching the Duluth/Twin Cities areas, and
- Hunter College School of Social Work, City University of New York

The North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC) also offers trainings with the option to purchase the curriculum and receive additional instruction on how to provide future trainings for other supporters within the community. The C.A.S.E. National Training Institute for Professionals to Support Foster, Kinship and Adoptive Families integrates theory, research, best practices, and innovative strategies with content that can be customized to suit an individual's specific needs or those of their organization.

### **Limitations**

I implemented the following delimitations for this study. The participant must be between 20 to 35 years old; identify as African American or Black; have Caucasian or White adoptive parents; lived with their adoptive parents for at least five years of their life; and define themselves as a bicultural person. Limitations of this study include the insufficient sample size of participants for phase 1, the lack of participant gender diversity in phase 2, the small range in age of adoption in phase 2, and the small sample size in phase 2.

An additional limitation of this study is the small sample size. As hopeful as I was to discover TRA individuals to participate in my study, it was disheartening to hear their reasons for declining to share their stories. Anecdotal data, collected during my recruitment process, appeared to offer validation to the silencing and misuse of minoritized voices in areas of research. Many of the people I encountered offered experiences of participating in other research studies and upon reading the published works, described their voices as being silenced or

manipulated to fit the perspective or agenda of the researcher. Such historical studies conducted on BIPOC individuals include The Tuskegee Syphilis Studies, The Human Radiation Experiments and the removal and use of Henrietta Lacks' human cells without her consent (Brandt, 1978; Faden et al., 1996; "Henrietta Lacks: Science must right a historical wrong," 2020; Jones, 2005; Thomas & Quinn, 1991; Vonderlehr, 1936; Welsome, 1999; Wolinetz & Collins, 2020). Knowledge of the injustices suffered by the individuals of the aforementioned studies created distrust towards not only the biomedical community, but also towards me, the researcher, and my willingness and/or ability to honor their stories and uplift the voices without misappropriating their lived experiences. So, while I was able to have many meaningful conversations with TRA individuals throughout my recruitment phase, I was not able to collaborate with them as participants of this study.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Participants of this study described experiences of cultural frame switching throughout their social interactions with others. Future studies could further explore cultural frame switching as a protective factor and outcome of TRA. Researchers may also consider comparative studies with two ethnically different TRAs, for example Caucasian parents and African American children and Caucasian parents and Korean children, respectively, and assess for shared experiences of cultural frame switching, the degree of cultural representation, and implications on identity development.

Ferrari, Rosnati et al., (2015) conducted a longitudinal study to determine the causal link between bicultural identity integration and adoptees' psychological well-being. These researchers were also interested in testing whether bicultural identity integration mediated the relationship between ethnic and national identity and psychological well-being (Ferrari, Rosnati

et al., 2015). Future studies could test whether the areas of parental socialization behaviors identified in this study mediate the relationship between identity integration and psychological well-being.

Traditional assessment scales often fail to capture the different experiences, behaviors, and meanings associated with bicultural identity development. Therefore, the implementation of a mixed methods approach is helpful in addressing the gap created by the limited capability of the assessment scales and in giving voice to the families with transracially adopted children. I was unable to achieve such a study at this time; however, the gap in assessment scales remains. Future researchers could utilize the measures identified in Phase I of this study and conduct exploratory measures to see if the data met parametric or nonparametric assumptions. They could then select methods of analysis that corresponded with the assumptions of the data. For example, if I was looking for a relationship between variables and my data was non-parametric, I would have conducted a cross-tabs analysis to calculate Chi-Square. Then I would have used the results from FACES IV and MULTIIS to test the following research hypotheses:

- There is a positive relationship between family flexibility and identity integration;
- There is a positive relationship between family cohesion and identity integration
- There is a positive relationship between family satisfaction and identity integration; and
- There is a positive relationship between family communication and identity integration.

The implementation and completion of such a study may offer greater assistance towards the development of reliable and valid assessment scales.

Findings from Feigelman (2000) indicate that adoptees of transracial adoptive families who resided in predominately Caucasian communities experienced adjustment difficulties and greater discomfort regarding their physical appearance than those whose families resided in

diverse areas. African American transracial adoptees typically reside in predominantly Caucasian communities and interact with Caucasian peers; therefore, it is important to discuss and understand the role of socialization in the development of a positive bicultural identity. Future studies could investigate the effects of educating non-adoptive, monoracial families on the existence of various family compositions and structures, specifically transracial families, and explore or determine how such education influenced the TRA's lived experience.

It is time to answer the deafening cry from the members of this population, to move beyond the controversy and towards the implementation of greater supports and systemic change. Donna Jackson Nakazawa (2004), author of the book *Does Anybody Else Look Like Me? A Parent's Guide to Raising Multiracial Children*, stated,

“[my husband and I desired] to help our son forge a strong self-core; to be able to look out into the world around him and bring his eyes back to his own mirror with self-love, with a clear-cut knowledge of who he was. Our goal was to imbue in him a deeply rooted self-identity - so that no matter what others might say, no matter what might occur, he would be crystal clear about his identity, about his absolute worth, within the greater world. We wanted to fill his emotional bank so full to the brim that it would well-withstand any withdrawals the world might make by way of stinging questions or comments by fostering in him an unshakeable faith in his own beauty and value and worth” (p. 3).

Though I did not interview every parent who has a multiracial child or who elected to adopt transracially, I feel confidence in my believe that a significant number of them would agree with the sentiment included in the above quote. Through awareness, support, and education, we can minimize, if not completely prevent, the unnecessary hurts encountered by members of the

adoptive community. By linking with others to complete this study, I learned that while some of us are practicing *Survival Skills*, *Racial Awareness*, and *Multicultural Planning*, as a society, we *Ain't Ready* for the individuals *Stuck Between Two Worlds; Part of Both but Claimed by Neither*. However, if we *Put Up or Shut Up* by acknowledging that TRAs *Are the Bridge* and that *Representation Matters*, then we too can experience what they already know to be true; *We All Family Here*.

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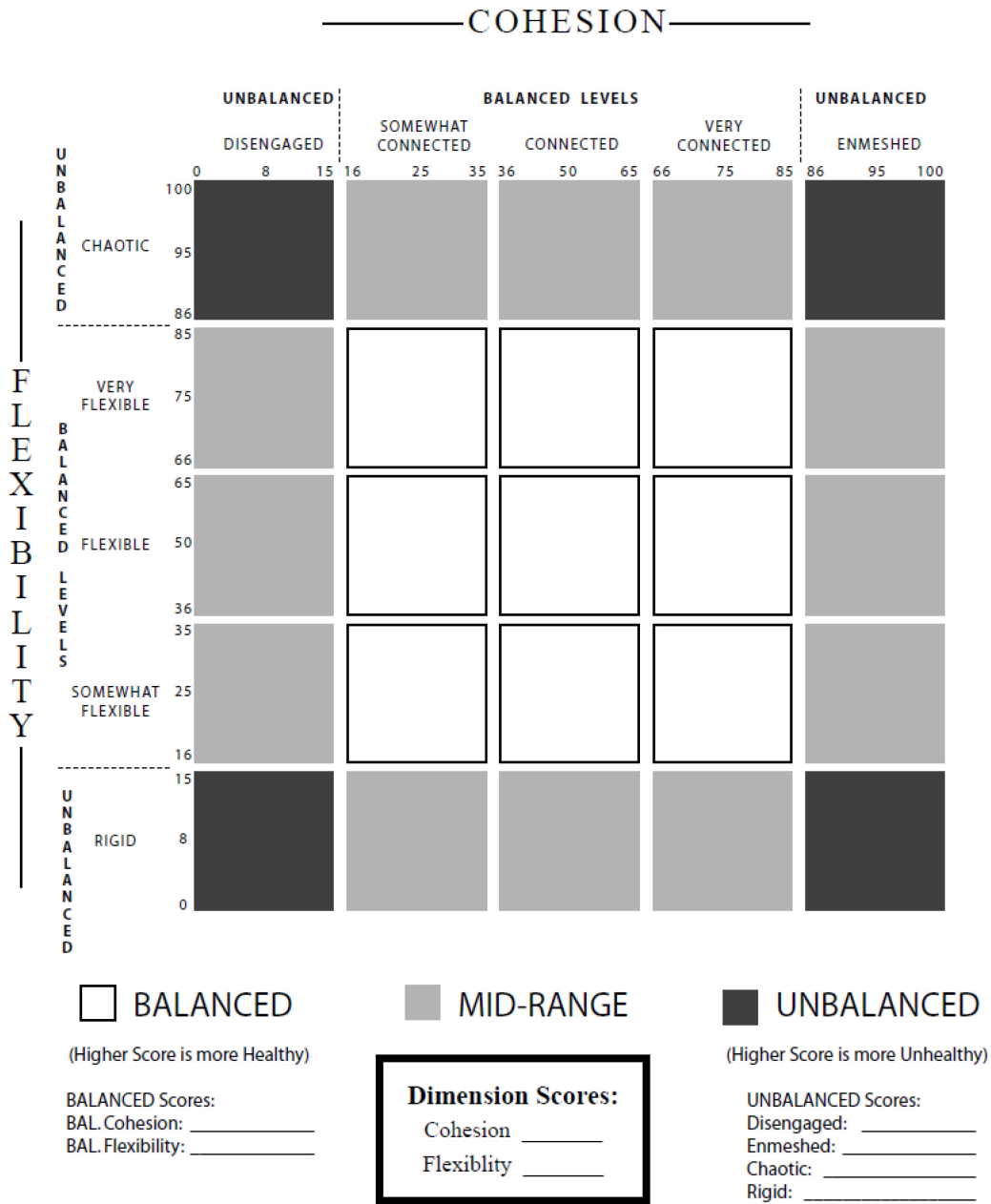
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Appendix A: Circumplex Model

Circumplex Model & FACES IV



## Appendix B: Survey

**Current Age:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Gender:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Age you were adopted:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Ethnicity:**

- (a) Black or African American
- (b) Mixed Race, perceived by others as Black
- (c) Mixed Race, perceived by others as White

**Current relationship status:**

- (a) Single, never married
- (b) Single, divorced
- (c) Single, widowed
- (d) Married, first marriage
- (e) Married, not first marriage
- (f) Life-partnership
- (g) Living together
- (h) Separated
- (i) Other

**Family Structure:**

- (a) Two parents (stepfamily)
- (b) Two parents (adoptive)
- (c) Two Parent (same sex)
- (d) One Parent

**Number of siblings when you were growing up:** \_\_\_\_\_

**If you had siblings, how many were adopted?** \_\_\_\_\_

**Are you in contact with your birth family?** YES NO

If yes, which family members? \_\_\_\_\_

**If you would like an invitation to volunteer for a second part of this study, please enter your information below.**

**Email Address:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Phone Number:** \_\_\_\_\_

The following questions look at your cultural identities and cultural contexts. While completing this questionnaire, please keep the following information in mind:

- Cultural identity refers to (1) the feeling of being a member of a particular cultural group, and (2) the experience of aligning with values, beliefs, behaviors, etc. of a particular culture.
- Cultural context refers to an environment that contains the values, beliefs and practices specific to a particular culture, and involves the company of members from that particular cultural group.

I would like to know how you think about your cultural identities. The following is a series of statements about how you see your different cultural identities. Please read each item carefully.

Please indicate how much each statement represents your experience using the following scale:

Please read each item carefully. Please indicate how much each statement represents your experience using the following scale:	Not at All 1	Slightly 2	A little 3	Moderately 4	Quite a Bit 5	Mostly 6	Exactly 7
I identify with one culture more than any other.							
When I'm in one cultural context, I feel like I should play down my other cultural identities.							
My cultural identities are connected.							
One cultural identity predominates in how I define myself.							
I keep my cultural identities separate from each other.							
My cultural identities fit within a broader identity							
One of my cultures is more relevant in defining who I am than the others.							
Each of my cultural identities is a separate part of who I am.							
The differences between my cultural identities complete each other.							
While I come from different cultures, only one culture defines me.							
I identify exclusively with one culture.							
When I am in a particular cultural context, I feel that I should not show my other cultural identities.							
My cultural identities complement each other.							
I identify with one of my cultures at a time.							
I have an identity that includes all my different cultural identities.							
I only really experience my different cultures if I identify with them one at a time.							
My cultural identities are all part of a broader group identity.							
I only really experience my different cultures if I identify with them one at a time.							
My cultural identities are part of a more global identity.							
The differences between my cultural identities cannot be reconciled.							
I draw similarities between my cultural identities.							
The differences between my cultural identities contradict each other.							

*\*This survey is available for public use and can be found in Yampolsky, M. A., Amiot, C. E., & De la Sablonnière, R. (2016). The Multicultural Identity Integration Scale (MULTIIS): Developing a comprehensive measure for configuring one's multiple cultural identities within the self. Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 22(2), 166-184. doi:10.1037/cdp0000043*

\*The rest of the online survey includes the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale, Version IV (FACES IV) and the Ryff Scales of Psychological Well Being (PWB). This information is copyrighted and therefore not included in this Appendix.



## **Appendix C: Electronic Invitation and Informed Consent**

### Beyond the Controversy: An Exploration of Cultural Socialization Behaviors in Transracial Adoptive Families

My name is Karmen R. Smith, and I am a doctoral candidate at Antioch University New England (AUNE). I am inviting you to participate in a research study about bicultural identity and family structure in transracially adopted African Americans. In order to participate in this study, you must be between 20 to 35 years old and:

- Identify as African American or Black,
- Have Caucasian or White adoptive parents,
- Lived with your adoptive parents for at least five years of your life, and
- Define yourself as a bicultural person.

The purpose of this study is to examine bicultural identity in transracial adoptive families. If you agree to be a part of this research study, you will be asked to take a computer survey about bicultural identity and family flexibility and unity. I expect this survey to take 15 - 30 minutes to complete. You may not receive direct benefit for participating. I hope this study will increase awareness of bicultural identity formation and help others working with transracial adoptive families.

Based on the results from this survey, I may call you for a follow-up interview. If you are okay with me contacting you at a later date, please make sure you enter your email address and/or phone number on the last page of the survey. I plan to publish the results of this study as part of my dissertation research. I will not include any information that could identify you. I would like

to hear from as many people as possible. If you know someone that might be willing to complete the survey, please send them this email.

Taking part in this study is voluntary. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You may choose not to answer an individual question or you may skip any section of the survey. Just click “Next” at the bottom of the survey page to move to the next question. When you finish the survey, you will have a chance to win a \$50.00 Amazon gift card. I will contact the winner once I have collected all the surveys.

If you have any questions about the study, you may contact Karmen R. Smith by telephone at xxx-xxx-xxxx or by email at [Email Address]

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact [Name], Chair of the Antioch University New England (AUNE) Institutional Review Board, at xxx-xxx-xxxx or by email at [Email Address] or [Name], Provost and CEO, at xxx-xxx-xxxx or by email at [Email Address]

By clicking on the link below, you are consenting to participate in this research survey.

If you do not wish to participate, click the “x” in the top corner of your browser to exit.

## Appendix D: Informed Consent

**Dissertation Title:** Beyond the Controversy: An Exploration of Cultural Socialization Behaviors  
in Transracial Adoptive Families

**Researcher:** Karmen R. Smith, MA, CRC, RMFTI

**Study Committee:** Kevin P. Lyness, PhD, LMFT (Chair)

Justine D'Arrigo-Patrick, PhD

Walter Lowe, PhD, LMFT

1. I understand that this is a research study. This study may have no direct benefit to me.
2. I understand that my involvement is voluntary. This means of my free will. I may change my mind and decide not to finish this study at any time. I will not be punished for leaving this study.
3. I understand that the Karmen may remove me from this study if I am not a good fit. If this happens, Karmen will give me a written reason of why she removed me from the study.
4. I understand that the purpose of this study to find the cultural behaviors that helped create my bicultural identity.
5. By agreeing to join this research study, I am also agreeing to these actions:
  - I will complete the survey portion of this study offered by Survey Monkey;
  - It is okay for Karmen to contact me some time after I finish the survey;
  - If I agree to meet with Karmen, she and I will meet for 60 – 90 minutes to talk about my views and experience growing up with White adoptive parents;
  - It is okay for Karmen to audiotape record the interview and review sessions; and
  - I will get a copy of the recorded interview and speak with Karmen if I want to change anything in my interview.
6. The interview and review session will take place in my home or a secure location of my choice.
7. There are possible risks in joining this study:
  - a. Answering the questions during the interview may bring up sensitive or hard topics.
  - b. Answering the questions during the interview may bring up painful emotions.

8. The possible benefits of joining this study might be:
- a. Talking with Karmen might be good for me. I might learn more about myself and the creation of my identity.
  - b. Benefits to others: The results of this study may be used to raise understanding and support for transracially-adopted people. The results may also create a guide for therapists working with transracial adoptive families.
9. I understand that all personal information, such as my name and phone number, is confidential. This information will not be given out to anyone.
10. Karmen told me the risks and benefits of joining this study. If I have any questions, I can call her at (xxx) xxx - xxxx. **Initial:** \_\_\_\_\_
11. Karmen also plans to include the results of this study in future educational journals and presentations. Our privacy agreement, as described above, will apply to all cases of information sharing. **Initial:** \_\_\_\_\_
12. I read and understand the Informed Consent. **Initial:** \_\_\_\_\_
13. Karmen gave me a copy of this form. **Initial:** \_\_\_\_\_

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact Karmen Smith by telephone at (xxx) xxxx - xxxx or by email at [Email Address]

If I have any questions about my rights as a research member, I can contact [Name], Chair of the Antioch University New England Institutional Review Board, at (xxx) xxx - xxxx or by email at [Email Address] or [Name], Provost and CEO, at (xxx) xxx - xxxx or by email at [Email Address].

Participant Name (Print): \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

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