



The Role of Developmental Comprehension in Understanding Microaggressions Conveyed by Transracially-Adopted Children

The Tufts University Adoption and Development Project

Anthony M. DeBenedetto; Ellen E. Pinderhughes, Ph.D.



Introduction

- Transracial adoptees (TRAs) typically experience challenges in the development of identity
- TRAs often experience bias in the form of microaggressions (MAs): daily verbal, behavioral or environmental messages, intentional or unintentional that communicate hostile or negative slights or insults (Sue et al., 2007) that may affect their self-perception
- TRAs experience both racial microaggressions (RMAs) and adoption microaggressions (AMAs) (Baden, 2016) from an early age, and may repeat them without fully comprehending the impact of these messages.
- Children's cognitive capacities affect their ability to comprehend complexities associated with adoption (Brodzinsky et. al., 1984) and racial difference, therefore, as children age, the frequency and content of the microaggressions internalized/conveyed may change.
- TRAs in the same adoptive family may convey similar MAs due to a similar experiences of cultural and adoption socialization.

Methods

- Data was taken from a larger sample (The Tufts Adoption and Development Project) in which TRAs were interviewed about topics of race and adoption.
- TRAs ages 4-11 (M=7.95, SD=1.82) were included in this study if they were a part of a sibling dyad (N=14).
- Interviews were coded to identify both experienced and internalized/conveyed AMAs and RMAs when children's discourse contained bias.
- Data were analyzed for trends in cognitive developmental age. 7 children ages 4-7 (M= 6.54, SD=0.96) and 7 children ages 8-11 (M=9.36, SD=1.26) were analyzed as preoperational (PO) and concrete-operational (CO) (Piaget, 1952) respectively for trends in internalized/conveyed MAs.
- 7 sibling dyads were included in the sample. Families were included in the sibling analysis if they had 1 child in each PO and CO developmental stage (n=5)

Definition	Example
Biology is best/normative	"they might want a child and they can't have one in their tummy"
Shameful/ inadequate birth parents	"children are place for adoption-sometimes parents cannot take care of their children... they could be on drugs...the father leaves the house"
Phantom birth parents	[adoption] sort of means you have to sign a lot of papers and then... they get a baby at the orphanage"
Commerce in adoption	"[adopted mother] says 'can I please have this baby?' and [biological mother] says 'give me 10 hundred bucks'"
Possible discomfort in talking about adoption	Sometimes I don't like talking about [adoption]

Results

Total Sample

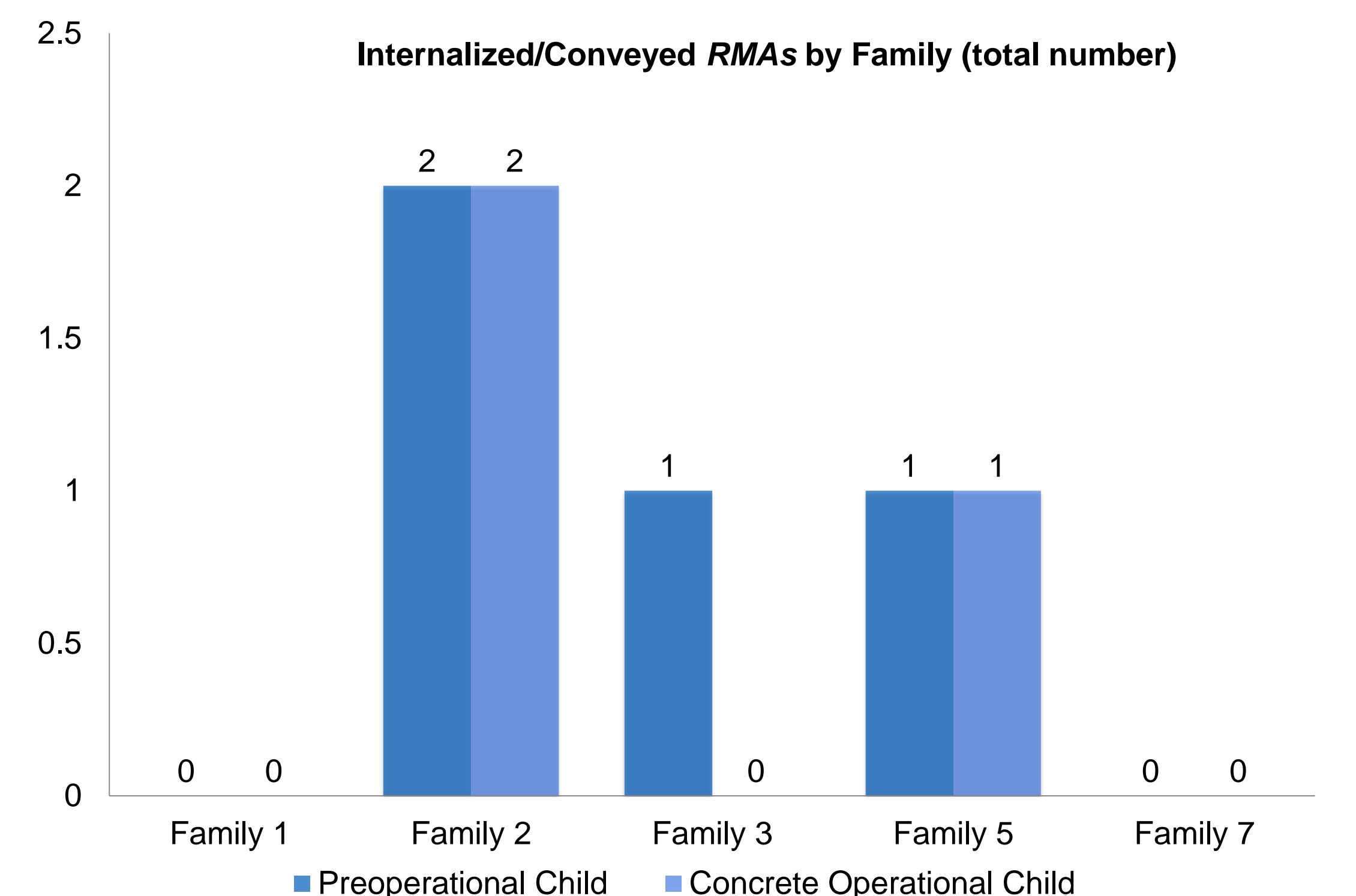
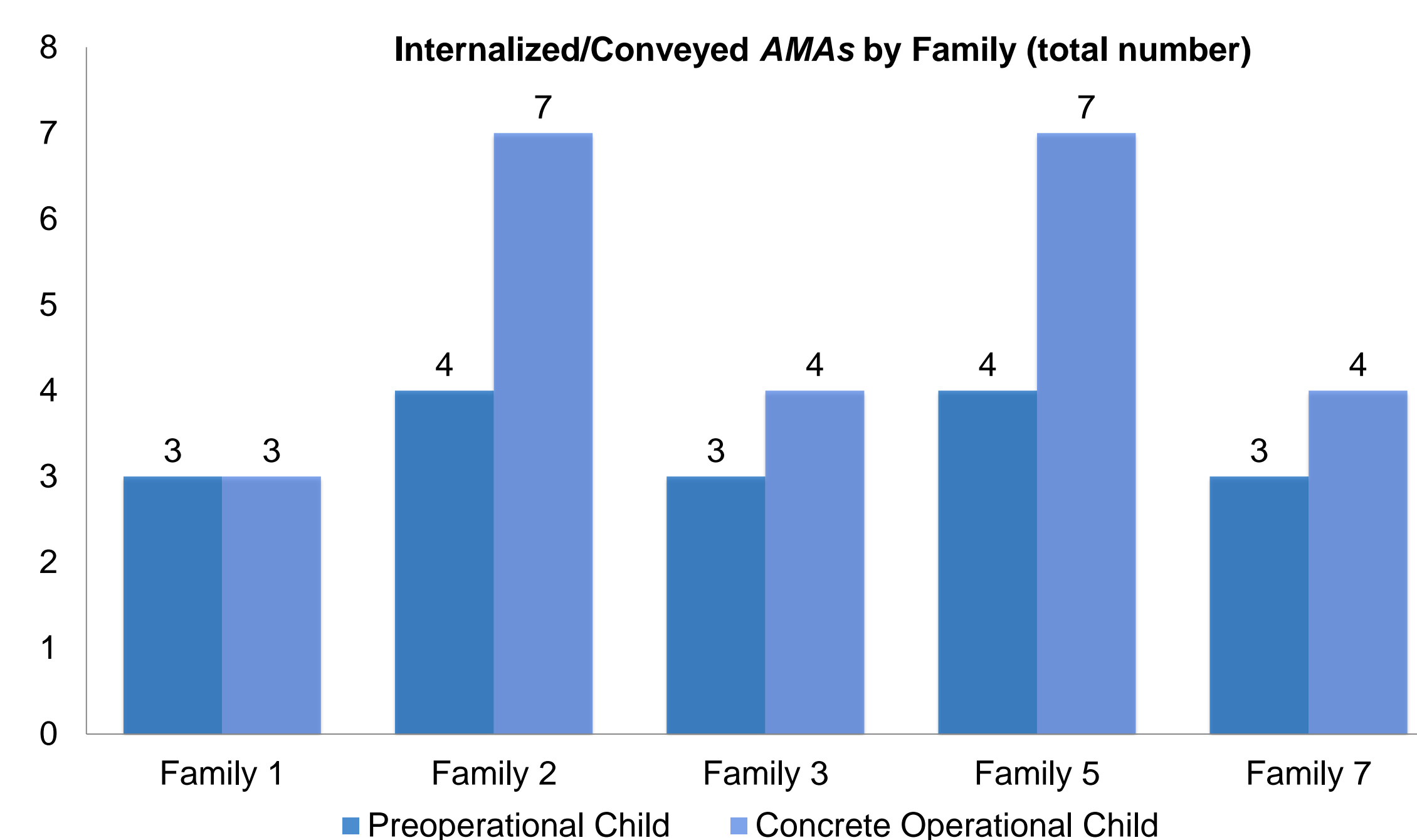
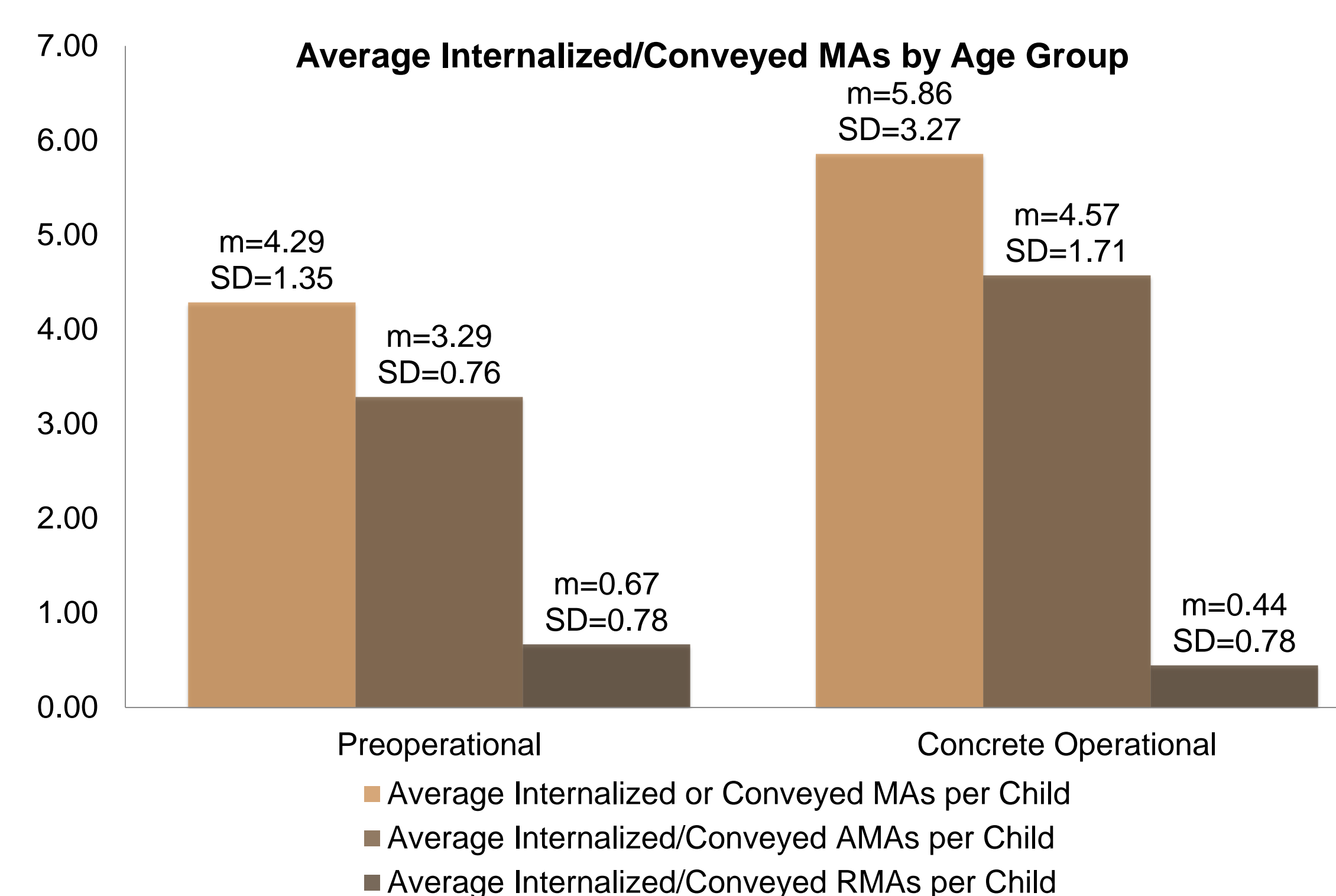
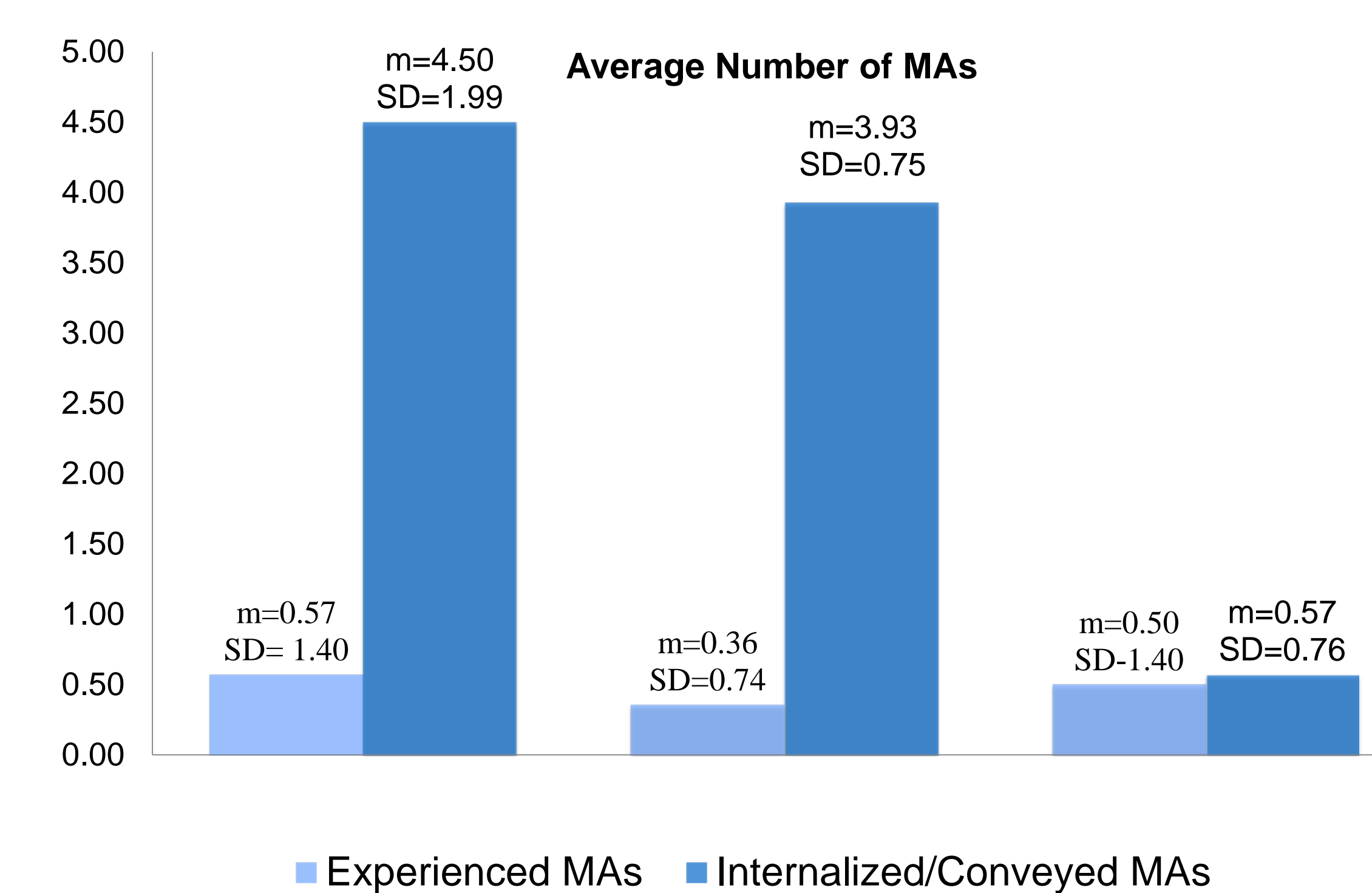
- Children averaged more internalized/conveyed MAs than experienced MAs
- Children experienced and internalized/conveyed **more AMAs than RMAs**
- Common AMAs internalized/conveyed included:
 - biology is best/normative
 - Shameful/inadequate birth parent
 - phantom birth parents
 - commerce in adoption
 - possible discomfort with talking about adoption

By Age Group

- CO children internalized/conveyed **more AMAs** than PO children
- CO children internalized/conveyed **fewer RMAs** than PO children
- CO children notably conveyed more:
 - biology is best/normative
 - Shameful/inadequate birth parent
 - phantom birth parent
 - possible discomfort with talking about adoption

Sibling Dyads

- CO children internalized/conveyed more total AMAs (m=5, SD=1.87) than their PO siblings (m=3.4, SD=0.55)
- CO children internalized/conveyed a comparable number of RMAs (m=0.6, SD=0.89) as their PO siblings (m=0.8, SD=0.84)
- CO children internalized/conveyed "Phantom birth parent" AMAs
 - more times in 2 families
 - fewer times in 1 family
 - an equal number for 1 family
- CO children internalized/conveyed "Biology is best/normative" AMAs
 - more times in 4 families
 - an equal number in 1 family
- CO children internalized/conveyed "Possible discomfort in talking about adoption" AMAs
 - more times in 1 family
 - an equal number for 1 family
 - fewer times for 3 families



Discussion

- TRAs may internalize and convey more AMAs than RMAs because of higher awareness due to greater racial socialization than adoption socialization.
 - Increased adoption socialization and education may increase adoptees' understanding of adoption, thus decreasing number of AMAs conveyed.
- Adoption is a multifactorial entity with many components, including adoptive and birth families, and financial transactions.
 - CO children have a greater adoption vocabulary (Brodzinsky, 1984), than their PO counterparts, but lack the abstract thinking to consider all of the complexities of adoption process,
 - Thus, CO children may convey more complex AMAs by only considering one aspect of adoption
- TRAs possible discomfort with talking about adoption may be lessened through family socialization and discussion.

Limitations

- Limited sample size to only include sibling dyads
- Only 5/7 families included siblings of different developmental level
- Does not include other developmental levels (formal operational, adulthood) due to study constraints

Future Directions

- Further studies to examine a wider range of ages of TRAs and MAs
 - Including adolescents, adults
- Further studies with a larger samples that specifically examine TRAs' families and sibling dyads:
 - Effects of family adoption socialization and discussion on internalized/conveyed AMAs
 - environmental adoption socialization/education on internalized/conveyed AMAs
 - Patterns of AMAs within sibling dyads

References

Baden, A.L. (2016). "Do you know your real parents?" and other adoption microaggressions. *Adoption Quarterly*, 19(1), 1-25.

Brodzinsky, D.M., Singer, L.M., & Braff, A.M. (1984). Children's understanding of adoption. *Child Development*, 55(3), 869-878.

Piaget, J., & Cook, M.T. (1952). *The origins of intelligence in children*. New York, NY: International University Press.

Sue, D.W., Capodilupo, C.M., Torino, G.C., Bucceri, J.M., Holder, A.M.B., Nadal, K.L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. *American Psychologist*, 62(4), 271-286

Acknowledgements

Funded by: William T. Grant Foundation and Tufts University
Thank you to the participating families, without whom this research would not be possible