

“Shared Ethnicity” in Transracial Adoption

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The discussion of transracial adoption of black infants by white parents calls into question the distinction between race and ethnicity for these children and their families. Research on the overall success of these adoptions indicate that most of the children are well-adjusted, have healthy self esteem, and do not have problems with issues of racial identity. This paper suggests that the concept of “shared ethnicity” might be useful construction for understanding these multiracial families.

This paper is an exploration of issues of transracial adoption of black infant children by white parents, from an ethnic studies perspective. My husband and I are white and the parents of two black adopted sons (and two homemade daughters). I am also a social worker, so I have both a personal and professional interest in the topic. The discussion of transracial adoption calls into question the distinction between race and ethnicity for these black children and their adoptive families. There are two important perspectives from which this is a critical question. The first is the internal experience of the individual person of being a member of a specific ethnic group, of possessing a certain “ethnicity.” The second is the perception of the larger community or society of the individual based upon visible racial characteristics, e.g. when we see a phenotypically Asian person, we make some assumptions about that person’s culture and behavior.

An examination of the issue of ethnicity in cases of adoption demands that we try to resolve the problem of whether ethnicity is an inherited trait (biologically or genetically transferred and thus inborn) or something that is learned (transferred to the child from infancy through the process of socialization). If ethnicity is inherited, if it is part of children when they are born, then to avoid robbing children of their ethnic birthright, adoption should be tightly restricted within ethnic groups. For instance, only German Mennonites should adopt a child of German Men-

nonite birthparents, only Irish Catholic adoptive parents should be appropriate for children of Irish Catholic birthparents, etc.

If ethnicity is learned as part of the socialization process, then an infant who is adopted by parents with a different ethnicity than his or her birthparents would be losing nothing, simply growing up with the ethnicity of the adoptive parents. Such a child would not have a sense of being deprived of a birthright, having been socialized in the ethnic environment of the adoptive family, just as biological children simply accept their family ethnicity as their own without question.

Regardless of the internal experience of the adopted child and whether ethnicity is inherited or learned, the social reality is that most individuals in our society continue to view people differently based on "race." One of the most prominent critiques of transracial adoption of black children by white parents is that these parents cannot teach their black children the necessary skills, attitudes, and strategies to survive as a black person in a white-dominated society.

In this paper, I will briefly review the evolution of transracial adoption in this country and its incidence in recent years. I will then summarize the major objections to the practice as a context from which to look at the research findings from studies of these adoptees. From there, I will focus on the ways in which an ethnic studies perspective can provide insight into transracial adoption. A central issue is the argument that transracially adopted black children do not learn how to interact with society in the ways in which society expects them to behave. Questions arising out of this issue are the following: In teaching our children how to "fit into" society based on the color of their skin, are we not colluding in a process that perpetuates the stereotypical and destructive images and realities of racial minorities in U.S. society?; and How do we prepare our children for the harsh realities of adulthood in this society (violence, discrimination, greed, etc.) without creating a self-fulfilling prophecy and contributing to the maintenance of the status quo?

Transracial Adoption in the United States

The practice of transracial adoption began in the United States after World War II when there were many orphaned and homeless children all over the world. In the 1960's, with impetus from the civil rights movement,¹ there were increasing numbers of these adoptions, with emphasis on placing black children in white homes.² In 1970, "one-third of the 6,500 black children in adoption were placed with white families."³ After the very clear statement in opposition to the practice from the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) in 1972, the number decreased significantly; half as many transracial adoptions were done in 1987 as in 1971.⁴ According to a 1992 report, "two percent of the total population of children in the United States are adopted."⁵ Out

of this number of adoptions, 12% are transracial, according to the National Council for Adoption;⁶ half of these are white parents adopting Asian children, predominantly Korean children.⁷ "In 1987, black-white transracial adoptions were estimated to be 1,169, while adoptions of children of other races--mainly Asian and Hispanic--were estimated to be 5,850."⁸ Simon estimated that, up to 1984, "approximately 20,000 black children had been placed in white homes in the United States."⁹

Major Objections to Transracial Adoption

From my understanding of the professional literature on transracial adoption, there are four major objections to the practice; two involve the experience and development of the individual children and two address larger issues of societal race relations. Concerning the children themselves, the first claim is that black children raised by white parents will not develop a strong black identity and black cultural pride, which may well result in feelings of low self-esteem and overall poor psychosocial adjustment.¹⁰ The second concern is that white parents cannot teach a black child the strategies to survive as a racial minority in a white-dominated society.¹¹

The objections from a societal perspective are that black women producing babies for white families is a continuation of the historic exploitation of blacks by whites in the United States¹² and that the raising of black children by white families is part of a process of cultural genocide.¹³ The strongest opponents of transracial adoption do not accept two assumptions that have driven the practice: "(1) that the black community cannot provide the needed black adoptive parents, and (2) that raising the black child in a white home will be better than raising him in an institution or foster home."¹⁴ A statement that summarizes this cultural opposition was made by the President of NABSW in 1985, reaffirming their 1972 response:

We are opposed to transracial adoption as a solution to permanent placement for Black children. We have an ethnic, moral, and professional obligation to oppose transracial adoption. We are therefore legally justified in our efforts to protect the rights of Black children, Black families, and the Black community. We view the placement of Black children in white homes as a hostile act against our community. It is a blatant form of race and cultural genocide.¹⁵

With regard to the first rejected assumption, I agree that the claim that an adequate number of black adoptive homes are not available is most likely more a function of the failure of the social services

system to facilitate access to the process than a reluctance on the part of the black community to respond to the need. This manifestation of institutional racism that perpetuates this failure certainly needs to be eliminated through more appropriate personnel and procedures.

While I am in sympathy with those members of the black community who feel strongly that their children should remain within the black community and that the movement of black babies into white families has an uncomfortable feel of potential exploitation and colonization, it is difficult for me to assign such insidious motivation to individual parents and families who are involved. The philosophical and political issues of social and economic justice that are inherent in these objections are beyond the scope of this paper, which is intended to look at the experiences of children in families. (A *Time* article in August, 1995, reported that the NABSW had altered its position to accept transracial adoption as a third option behind preservation of biological African-American families and the placement of black children in black homes.¹⁶)

Is the adoption of 20,000 children in 50 years part of a larger pattern of exploitation and domination in an overall strategy by whites to erode the black community? In terms of population, the numbers are too small to have much effect on either group. Individually, have some black children been placed with white parents for the "wrong" reasons? Surely some have been motivated by what might be called parent-centered reasons rather than by child-centered reasons. Certainly some social workers have placed black children with white families because of the failure of the system to recruit black families. My understanding is that, in general, most cases simply involve a black child who needs a home and white parents who are desirous of providing one. In light of the research, it does not seem justified to assign racially hostile intentions to individuals who participate in this practice.

Research Results: Racial Identity, Self-Esteem, Adjustment

Beginning in the 1970s, several studies have been done to determine the success of transracial adoption from a variety of perspectives. Children's adjustment to adoption and their overall well-being has been compared to black children adopted by black parents, other non-white children adopted by white parents, children adopted inracially, adopted children in general, as well as to the total population of children. Research has indicated that about 75% of adopted children "...will grow up to be normal adults."¹⁷ Feigelman and Silverman, in 1984, found little evidence to support claims of the damaging consequences of transracial adoption. Studies showed that about three-fourths of the children (mostly preadolescent and younger) had adapted well and that racial awareness, identification, and self-esteem did not appear to be problematic.¹⁸ In 1981, Feigelman and Silverman conducted a follow-

up of a 1975 study in which they surveyed 372 adoptive families. Numbers based on the racial and national subgroups of the last adopted child of these families included 65 white, 47 black, 161 Korean, 19 Columbian, and 22 other children. At the time of the study, two-thirds of the children were between seven and twelve years of age, while the remaining third were thirteen to twenty-five. In the 1975 study, Feigelman and Silverman concluded that the child's age at placement was the most decisive element in influencing black children's maladjustment scores.¹⁹ Again in their 1981 research, they found that, although race difference and racial antagonism had some influence in the outcome of transracial adoption, these factors were "...overshadowed by the significance of factors associated with the child's age and long delays in his or her eventual adoptive placement."²⁰ In conclusion, they did not find support for arguments that transracially adopted children in white homes experience psychological damage.²¹

A study by Johnson, Shireman, and Watson, of families who had adopted children in the early 1970s, involved interviews of 26 transracial (black/white) adoptive families and 26 inracial (black/black) adoptive families. The families had been interviewed shortly after the adoption, again when the child was four, and a third time at age eight. At age eight, the authors report that "about three-quarters of the transracially adopted children were judged to be doing well; to enjoy close relationships with their parents, brothers, and sisters; to have friends; and to be relatively free of symptoms of emotional distress."²² Relative to racial identity, the number of children who identified themselves as black was the same in transracial as inracial adoptive families.²³

McRoy, Zurcher, Lauderdale, and Anderson examined the self-esteem and racial identity of children in 60 families, 30 in which white parents had adopted black children and 30 in which black parents had adopted black children. The mean age of the children was 13.5 years. With regard to self-esteem, the authors concluded that there was no difference between the transracially and inracially adopted children in the sample. The level of self-esteem of the adoptees was as high as is found among the general population.²⁴

The data about racial identity is more difficult to interpret. Of the children adopted by white parents, only eight had two black biological parents, while the remaining 22 were of mixed parentage. Only five of the children adopted by black parents were of mixed parentage. McRoy et al. report that "transracially adopted children were more likely to identify themselves as being adopted and to use racial self-referents than inracially adopted children."²⁵ Most (86%) of the white parents of mixed parentage adoptees considered their children to be 'biracial,' and were reluctant to accept the notion that they would be socially and legally defined as black.²⁶ The black parents of similar children, on the other hand, tended to stress to their children that they would be socially de-

efined as black. There was a great deal of congruency between the perception of the parents and the children with regard to racial identity. Since there were no differences in self-esteem among these groups of children, McRoy, et. al. suggest that these findings support earlier observations that "...self-esteem and racial self-perception may operate independently in black adopted children."²⁷

Simon and Altstein, in 1972, 1979, and 1984, interviewed 88 families who had adopted transracially. Along with parent interviews, these researchers talked to 218 children in these families. When parents were asked about their relationship with their adopted children, 79 (90%) families responded that it was "basically positive and good" or "there are problems, but the positive elements outweigh the negative ones." Only 9 (10%) families choose "the problems are such that the negative elements outweigh the positive ones" or "basically negative and bad."²⁸ In summary, Simon and Altstein describe the majority of the families in their study as warm, well-integrated, with healthy individual self-esteems and positive relationships with each other.²⁹

The research on transracial adoption, then, suggests that the practice results in a very positive outcome for most of the children and families. In summarizing their review of the recent literature on transracial adoption, Simon and Altstein state that the research continues to demonstrate that,

...transracial adoptees do not seem to be losing their racial identities, they do not appear to be racially unaware of who they are, and they do not display negative or indifferent racial attitudes about themselves. To the contrary, it appears that transracially placed children and their families are... living quite normal and satisfying lives.³⁰

The case is put more strongly by Bartholet in her 1993 book on adoption and the politics of parenting when she states that there is virtually no evidence that transracial adoption has a harmful effect on children. She claims, however that "...there is extensive, unrefuted, and overwhelmingly powerful evidence that the delays in permanent placement and the denials of such placement that result from current matching policies do devastating damage to the children involved."³¹

The question of whether or not white parents can teach a black child the strategies to survive in a white-dominated society has not been specifically addressed by adoption research. This may be partially because the process of teaching these strategies has not been identified. According to Tizard and Phoenix, "...we lack knowledge of the extent to which black parents,...provide their children with the means to cope with racism, or what the various coping mechanisms are, since these issues

have rarely been studied.”³² Research on transracial adoptees up to age 25, however, has indicated very positive results in terms of self-esteem, racial identity, and general psychosocial adjustment. One would expect that, if white parents had failed in this critical survival issue, this would have had a significant effect on these related measures of well-being. Without evidence to the contrary, it is reasonable to conclude that these adoptive families have provided black children with the psychological, emotional, and social strength to prosper in the larger society.

The concern around this issue of teaching survival skills is actually a concern about how a person interacts in the world given societal perceptions based on physical racial identity. A relevant issue is the unique nature of interracial adoptive families. Even though white parents are still white after they adopt black children, I would argue that there is a qualitative difference between these families and unracial families. When we were in the process of our first adoption and were considering the question of race, the social worker told us that, “If you adopt a black child, you will become a black family.” She was sharing with us her professional experience of community response to such adoptions.

Small described three types of families who adopt transracially. Within the third type, he found the “real parents.” These parents go beyond their own interest toward the interest of the child, are open-minded, secure in their own identities and are able to resist societal pressures that reflect stereotypes and narrow views of family. “They eventually become black families in white skins.”³³ Thus, while not physically becoming black, white parents of black children may develop some of the same survival skills that black parents have, possibly from experiences of racism and discrimination perpetrated on their family.

It has certainly been the experience of our family that we are a different family now than we were before we adopted the boys. We are much better connected now to the black community, we are much more likely to attend multicultural events, especially African-American celebrations. We have recently made a decision to move outside the United States to do some service work and our choice of assignment was significantly effected by concerns about the acceptance of our non-white children. Although instances of blatant racism perpetrated on our family have been rare, they have had a profound effect on our worldview as parents and as US citizens. This transformation in the nature of the transracial adoptive family is a subject for further research in the field.

Is Ethnicity a Birthright?

We have seen that, in general, children who have been adopted transracially are well-adjusted and have healthy self-esteems and racial identities. Still, some of us question whether, in the big picture, transracial

adoption is a good idea. Only the strongest opponents argue that it is better for black children to spend their childhood in foster care or an institution than with white parents. Many people, even those who have serious concerns about the practice, tend to agree with Altstein when he states, "A black home is always better than a non-black home, but a family is better than a non-family."³⁴ When we begin to look at the distinction between race and ethnicity, the issue becomes even more complicated.

Race is a set of physical characteristics that distinguish one group of people from another. Ethnicity is the "...character or quality of an ethnic group."³⁵ "Ethnic group' is a reference group invoked by people who share a common historical style (which may be only assumed), based on overt features and values, and who, through the process of interaction with others, identify themselves as sharing that style."³⁶ "Race is not the same as culture [ethnicity]. Racial characteristics are physical and inborn, while cultural [ethnic] characteristics are learned and acquired after birth."³⁷ "A person does not belong to an ethnic group by choice. He is born into it and becomes related to it through emotional and symbolic ties."³⁸

So far, transracial adoption makes sense within these conceptions of race and ethnicity. A child's physical characteristics prescribe a certain description according to race, but the child grows up with a given ethnicity, which is accepted by the child as "natural." Since no one gets to choose their ethnicity, this experience is not different than that of children who are raised by their biological parents. However, when we consider the aspect of ethnicity that is based on the external perceptions of society, then the case is not so clear.

Isajiw, in discussing the subjective approach to the definition of ethnicity,

...defines ethnicity as a process by which individuals either identify themselves as being different from others or belonging to a different group or are identified as different by others, or both identify themselves and are identified as different by others.³⁹

A black child raised by white parents might identify him or herself in the context of his or her parents' ethnicity, but with the recognition of race, for instance, black German Mennonite or black Irish Catholic. The child's social environment, however, might assign him or her the ethnicity of African-American, with the variety of assumptions and expectations that might entail. Contact with this social environment, then, could be confusing and a child might be ill-prepared for the interactions.

"An ethnic group consists of people who conceive of themselves of being of a kind."⁴⁰ This conception poses further concerns relative to

transracial adoption. With what "kind" will a black child being raised by white parents identify? If ethnicity is learned primarily from family, children will belong to the ethnic group of their parents. They will take on an identity with their "kind," as they live and develop within their extended family, neighborhood, community, school, church, etc., just as all children are socialized. In the case of these black children, however, their "kind" might be defined in society differently than the way it is defined in their family and immediate social environment. The research seems to indicate that this has not been problematic for the children, but still, is it fair and right? Are we robbing these children of something that is rightfully theirs, i.e. to be raised in a family that matches their racial characteristics so that there is less potential confusion between race and ethnicity?

In a previously quoted statement from NABSW, the opposition to transracial adoption is justified in terms of protecting the rights of black children. Another group, the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC), while supporting transracial adoption in order to prevent unnecessary delays in placement, contends that "...the ethnic and cultural heritage of the child is an essential right..."⁴¹ In light of the overwhelmingly positive results of the research on the outcomes of transracial adoption, Hayes rejects the "rights" argument. He sees that the objective of inculcating minority children with ethnic and cultural awareness has developed out of a political agenda opposed to transracial adoption. According to this agenda, there is only one correct way to raise minority children; Hayes contends that other approaches may well be just as effective. He denies that minority children placed for adoption have either the right or the need to develop a distinct ethnic identity or awareness of cultural heritage.⁴²

Although from a narrow legalistic view, I might agree with Hayes, from a practical parental view, I strongly disagree. Whether or not my sons have a "right" to a relevant racial and cultural identity, it would seem absurd and even cruel to deny that to them. The existence of race as a significant social construct is a fact in US society. To ignore that reality in the raising of any of our children would be neglectful at the very least. A healthy self-esteem, which includes a sense of cultural awareness, would seem to be a very basic goal of all parents for their children.

When the rights of children are at issue in discussions of transracial adoption, one other aspect should be considered. Ironically, NACAC, the group that affirmed the right of children to their ethnic and cultural heritage, also firmly states its commitment to another right:

We believe every child has the right to a loving, 'forever' family of his or her own. For a great many children now in foster or institutional care, permanency and love can *only* be found through adoption....⁴³

As in many issues addressed by social services policy-makers and practitioners, adoption decisions require a great deal of professional judgment that balances the various rights and needs of all of the parties involved.

Multiculturalism

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. dreamed of and worked for a world in which people would be judged by the content of their character rather than by the color of their skin. When white parents adopt black children because they desire to parent a child (not specifically a white child), we feel some discomfort about the rightness of the practice. We worry that with a white upbringing, children will not know how to act like people might expect them to act when they go out into the world. They will not expect to be treated a certain way because of the color of their skin. They will not have the necessary "inclination toward doubt of white persons" or the "adaptive inclination to distrust" that they need for survival.⁴⁴ By teaching our children to expect negative treatment because of their race, are we not colluding in and even reinforcing the status quo in which people are indeed judged first by the color of their skin?

Given the social realities of race relations in the United States today, we should be worried about all of our children. Teaching our black children to distrust all white people and to expect to be treated unfairly is probably not a good solution. Considering the recurring incidence of violence against women by men, we should worry about our daughters. Teaching our daughters to distrust all men and expect to be abused by them is probably not a good idea. It makes sense to me that we should love each of our children for who they are and to nurture their self-esteem so that they can walk out into the world with their own strength and their own pride in their individual race, gender, and ethnicity.

And in all of this legitimate worry, is there not room for some legitimate celebration? We could celebrate the fact that some children and some parents and some brothers and sisters of various descriptions have gotten together to make families and that most of them seem to be doing well. We could celebrate the fact that, in spite of increasing racial tension in the larger society, some families are living together in harmony in multiracial communities. Isn't that what we say we want? Bartholet has observed that transracial adoptees perceive "their world as essentially pluralistic and multicolored," and suggests that their socialization in two worlds might make them better prepared to operate in both.⁴⁵

Conclusion

When I began this exploration into transracial adoption, I was motivated by both a professional and personal interest. I wanted to better understand the issues, hoping that an ethnic studies perspective would shed some new light on the subject. The research seems to present a positive evaluation of the practice of transracial adoption for most of the children and their families. Professionally, I believe that the social services system must do a more effective job of identifying and recruiting black adoptive parents, not because black children are necessarily in peril with white parents, but because we cannot afford to ignore any resources for the care of all of our children.

Transracial adoptive families are only a subgroup of a growing number of families, for instance those that are formed through interracial marriage or remarriage, in which adults and children of a variety of races and/or ethnicities join together. I suggest that such families create their own "shared ethnicity," a unique blend of the racial heritage and cultural background of the members, carried out in the present in family experiences, traditions and values.

Even though I agree in principle that children do not have an inalienable right to any specific ethnic heritage, I intend to raise my children to be proud of who they are, including their membership in a racial group. Our family values and celebrates difference, which represents the richness of what each of us brings to each other and to the world. Our family ethnicity will be a "shared ethnicity" growing out of our collective pasts and our present choices about how to be in the world. Racial identity will be one of many factors that will influence this unique ethnicity.

Notes

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- ¹⁸ Feigelman and Silverman, 589-90.
- ¹⁹ Feigelman and Silverman, 588-601.
- ²⁰ Feigelman and Silverman, 597-98.

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²³ Johnson, et al., 45-55.

²⁴ McRoy, et al.

²⁵ McRoy, et al.

²⁶ McRoy, et al.

²⁷ McRoy, et al., 526.

²⁸ R.J. Simon and H. Altstein, *Adoption, Race, and Identity: From Infancy through Adolescence* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1992), 185, 188-89.

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³⁰ Simon and Altstein, 28.

³¹ E. Bartholet, *Family bonds: Adoption and the politics of parenting* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993), 101-102.

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⁴⁴A. Chimezie, 299.

⁴⁵E. Bartholet.