

# Transracial Adoption: Children and Parents Crossing the Color Line

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# Topics:

- Definitions
- Positive Adoptive Language
- History of Transracial Adoption
- Opposition to Transracial Adoption
- Recent Policy Changes and Legislation
- Frequency of Transracial Adoption in 21<sup>st</sup> Century
- Outcome Studies for Adopted Children
- Outcomes for Transracially Adopted Children
- 4 Strategies of Adoptive Parents in Multiracial Families
- Developmental Stages and Challenges
- Pediatricians and Opportunities for Discussion about Adoption and Racial Identity



# Definitions

- Transracial adoption is the adoption of children of one race by parents of another race.
- Most transracial adoptions are European American/White parents adopting children of color.
- Domestic adoptions: Adoption of Native American, African American, Asian American, and Latin American, or multiracial children.
- International Adoptions: Adoption from Asian countries such as South Korea, China and India; Latin American countries such Guatemala, El Salvador, Mexico, and Columbia; and African countries such as Ethiopia.

# Positive Adoption Language

## Positive Language

- Birthparent
- Biological parent or sibling
- Birth child
- Parent, mother, father
- Child, brother or sister
- Was adopted
- Born to unmarried parents
- Terminated parental rights
- Made an adoption plan
- To parent
- Inter-country adoption
- Adoption triad
- Child placed for adoption
- Child with special needs
- Child born abroad

## Negative Language

- Real parent
- Natural parent or sibling
- Own child
- Adoptive parent
- Adopted child, brother or sister
- Is adopted
- Illegitimate
- Gave up
- Gave away
- To keep
- Foreign adoption
- Adoption triangle
- An unwanted child
- Handicapped child
- Foreign child



# History of Transracial Adoption

- 1920: Matching Adoption Policy- Creation of adoptive families to appear like biological families.
- 1948: First recorded transracial adoption of an African American child by White parents in Minnesota.
- 1958-1967: Indian Adoption Project
  - Collaboration between the Bureau of Indian Affairs (federal agency) and the Child Welfare League of America (association of non-profit organizations) to place Native American foster children from reservations into adoptive families with White parents.



# History of Transracial Adoption

- 1960's: African American Adoptions
  - Impact of the civil rights movement, led to White couples adopting African American children.
  - 1960: Parents to Adopt Minority Youngsters founded in Minnesota, influenced by Canadian organizations.
- 1955: International Adoption Begins
  - Following the end of the Korean War in 1955, large numbers of South Korean children were adopted by White American parents.
  - Since 1980's: Other countries, especially China and Latin American countries have allowed transracial adoptions by U.S. parents.

# Opposition to Transracial Adoption: African American Children

- **1971: National Association of Black Social Workers** called for an end to the adoption of Black children by White parents, and determined that it was equivalent to “cultural genocide.”
- By mid-1980’s, adoption agencies responded by giving preference to same-race adoptions, and the number of transracial adoptions of Black children was reduced by almost half, from 2,574 in 1971 to 1,400 in 1987 (Simon & Alstein, 2000).

# Opposition to Native American and International Transracial Adoptions


- 1978: Native American activists made similar claims, and the **Indian Adoption Project** was abolished.
- 1978: The **Indian Child Welfare Act** required tribal approval of all adoptions of children with Native American heritage. This requirement remains law today.
- 1993: **Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Inter-country Adoption** established international law to standardize adoption.
- 2000: To deal with potentially illegal international adoptions, Congress passed the **Inter-country Adoption Act** and **Child Citizenship Act** to standardize overseas adoptions.





# Shifts in U.S. Policy on Domestic Adoptions

- The overrepresentation of racial/ethnic minority children in the foster care system, and the large numbers of waiting children, led to a re-examination of same-race adoption practices.
- 1994: **The Multi-Ethnic Placement Act** requires adoption agencies that receive federal funding to promote adoption for foster care children. Race must not be a determinant factor in rejecting a placement for a child.
- 1996: **The Interethnic Adoption Provisions** affirmed this change in policy and imposed penalties for violations.



# Increase in Numbers of Domestic Transracial Adoption

- 1990's: 14% of all domestic adoptions were transracial (Vonk, 2001).
- 2000: 17% of all adopted children live in families with parents of a different racial background (Census, 2000). These numbers have likely increased due to federal legislation.
- 2003: 15% of all foster care adoptions were transracial (National Adoption Information Clearinghouse, 2003).



# Increase in Numbers of International Transracial Adoption

- International adoptions have more than doubled in a decade, with approximately 20,000 adoptions taking place a year (U.S. State Department, 2001), 60% of them from Asia (The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2005).
- 2001: More than 110,000 children have been adopted from South Korea, approximately 10% of the current Korean American Population



# Mental Health Outcome Research on Adoption

- Search Institute study of 715 adopted adolescents shows equivalent outcomes for adopted and non-adopted children in areas of self-esteem, attachment to parents, academic achievement, social competency, at-risk behaviors, anxiety level, and externalizing and internalizing behaviors (Benson, Sharma, & Roehlkepartain, 1994).
- Adopted children's well-being outcomes were actually higher than national averages for most indicators not accounting for socioeconomic status.
- While most adopted children have positive outcomes, adopted children are overrepresented in the clinical population.

# Mental Health Outcome Research on Adoption

Parent-reported learning and attention difficulties (Census, 2000)

	Girls	Boys
Biological Children	3%	5%
Step Children	4%	8%
Adopted Children	8%	13%

# Three Types of Research into Transracial Adoption

1. Mental Health Outcome Studies: Transracial adoptees are compared with same-race adoptees or non-adoptees to measure psychological adjustment.

## *Results*

- Research demonstrates that transracial adoption does not place a child at a higher risk for emotional or behavioral problems. Additionally, transracially adopted children did not differ in levels of self-esteem and social adjustment (Lee, 2003).
- Search Institute study (1994) suggests that transracial adoptees do not differ from same-race adoptees in the areas of well-being, at-risk behavior, or self-rated mental health.

# Three Types of Research into Transracial Adoption

2. Racial/Ethnic Identity Studies: Examination of the extent to which transracial adoptees are proud or comfortable with their race and ethnicity.

## *Results:*

- Initial research findings show vast variability in the understanding and expression of racial and ethnic identities among transracial adoptees. Variables include race (African American and Latino showing greater racial identification than Asian adoptees), geography, age at adoption, and stage of development (Lee, 2003).
- Transracial adoptees demonstrate racial awareness by correctly identifying their own race and do not maintain White racial preference (Simon & Altstein, 2002).

# Three Types of Research into Transracial Adoption

## 3. Cultural Socialization Outcome Studies:

(Emerging area of study – few studies)

Attempt to understand how transracial adoptees and their parents make meaning of their identities, and to examine the relationship between these efforts and psychological adjustment.

### *Results:*

- Emerging evidence that positive racial and ethnic experiences contribute to psychological adjustment in transracially adopted African American children (DeBerry, Scarr, & Weinberg, 1996).
- Higher levels of parental cultural socialization related to fewer reported externalizing problems in transracially adopted Asian children (Johnston, Swim, Saltsman, Deater-Deckard, & Petrill, 2007).





# Strategies of Parents

1. Cultural Assimilation: Color-blind perspective.
2. Enculturation: Acknowledgement of differences, and effort to teach children about their birth culture.
3. Racial Enculturation: Acknowledgement of racism, and attempt to teach survival strategies and affirm a positive racial identity.
4. Child Choice: Practice of allowing transracially adopted children to decide their own level of identity and involvement in their birth culture (Lee, 2003)

## Developmental Stages for Transracial Adoptees Reena Bernards and Katie Hrapczynski, 2007

Age of Child	Erikson's Stages of Development/ Duvall's Family Life Cycle	Cognitive-social Development Stages	Racial Awareness	Adoption Stages of Development	Challenges for Transracial Adoptees
Infancy-2 years	Trust vs. Mistrust  Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt  ■ Family adjustment to new baby / Resolving grief of infertility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Communicates feelings</li> <li>■ Recognize self as separate person</li> </ul>	None	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Recover from separation trauma</li> <li>■ Bonding and attachment to adoptive parents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Infant response to parental comfort level with being a multi-racial family</li> </ul>
3-5 years	Initiative vs. Guilt  ■ Parents addressing racial differences with extended family and community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Me-self emerges</li> <li>■ Classifies objects by single feature</li> <li>■ Lacks awareness of other people's perspectives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Aware of differences in people's physical characteristics</li> <li>■ May have already learned negative racial stereotypes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Integrating "news" of adoption is discussed by family</li> <li>■ Adoption usually seen as normal and positive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Notices differences between their physical characteristics and their parents' (skin color, eye shape, etc.)</li> </ul>

## Developmental Stages for Transracial Adoptees

Reena Bernards and Katie Hrapczynski, 2007

Age of Child	Erikson's Stages of Development/ Duvall's Family Life Cycle	Cognitive-social Development Stages	Racial Awareness	Adoption Stages of Development	Challenges for Transracial Adoptees
6-9 years	Industry vs. Inferiority <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Fitting into community of school-age families</li> <li>■ Encouraging children's educational achievement</li> <li>■ Finding resources about child's birth culture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Classify objects by multiple features</li> <li>■ Begins to ask "Where did I come from?"</li> <li>■ Understands that others have different perspectives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Understands constancy of skin color</li> <li>■ Begins to understand that skin color has social significance</li> <li>■ May over-generalize racial categories</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Fantasy stories of "perfect" biological parents</li> <li>■ Grief in recognizing loss in adoption story</li> <li>■ Tries to determine who is to "blame"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Dealing with racial comments from people outside the family</li> <li>■ Wanting to look like adoptive parents</li> <li>■ Observing people from birth culture</li> </ul>
10-12 years	Industry vs. Inferiority <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Continuing to foster racial socialization, finding role models and mentors from child's birth culture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Can take other person's perspective</li> <li>■ Concentrates on comparisons with peers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Understands constancy of racial identity</li> <li>■ May begin to be treated through the adult stereotypes of their race</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Self image may be related to birth story</li> <li>■ Issues of abandonment may interfere with self-image/ industry</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Peer identity groups begin to take racial significance</li> <li>■ May assume perspectives of birth culture</li> </ul>

# Developmental Stages for Transracial Adoptees


Reena Bernards and Katie Hrapczynski, 2007

Age of Child	Erikson's Stages of Development/ Duvall's Family Life Cycle	Cognitive-social Development Stages	Racial Awareness	Adoption Stages of Development	Challenges for Transracial Adoptees
12-20 years	<p>Identity vs. Identity Confusion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Balancing freedom with responsibility for teenagers</li> <li>■ Releasing young adult into work, college, marriage, etc.</li> <li>■ Gaining comfort with child's racial and peer identity choices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Can think logically about abstract ideas</li> <li>■ Able to take neutral third-party perspective on self and others</li> <li>■ Social comparisons decrease, inner values increase in importance</li> <li>■ Separation from parents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Search for identity intensifies, includes racial and ethnic components</li> <li>■ Importance of peer group informing racial or ethnic identity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Choosing pieces of identity from biological and adoptive parents</li> <li>■ Some fear of separation due to abandonment ambiguity</li> <li>■ May initiate search for biological family</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ May feel torn between two cultural identities</li> <li>■ Adopted parents may see different racial identity as rejection</li> <li>■ May find it difficult to choose between peer groups</li> </ul>



# Recommendations for Clinicians

- Model being comfortable talking about adoption, race, ethnicity and multiracial families.
- Ensure that adoption and racial issues are discussed within the family.
- Challenge parents to provide multi-racial environment, mentors, family friends.
- Teach parents to provide developmentally sensitive racial socialization practices and preparation for bias.
- Racial minority clinicians may play a role in translating and mediating the adoptees racial culture with the family.



# Pediatricians and the Topics of Adoption and Racial Identity

- Medical Opportunities for Discussion:
  - Medical history of birth family and adoptive family:  
Acknowledging genetic and environmental influences
  - Sickle-cell anemia carrier test
  - Mongolian spots
  - Lactose intolerance
  - Normative size charts
  - Hair and skin care
  - Discussing how skin color and hair texture changes over time  
(particularly relevant for biracial children)
  - Others?



# Possible Conversations about Cultural Competence

- Model comfort with naming race and ethnicity
- Ask parent if child knows their adoption story
- Ask parent if child is learning about birth culture
- Ask parent if their child's environment is diverse
- Ask older child if they feel supported as a member of a transracial family

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