

# Black and white thinking?

## Transracial adoption photos promote negative emotions and negative adoption attitudes.

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### Introduction

Adoptive families may be perceived as less natural or legitimate than families created through birth because parents and children are not genetically related. Consequently, adoptive parents and children may not resemble one another, and family bonds cannot be legitimized through shared physical attributes (e.g., “She has her Daddy’s smile/eyes/hands”). For this reason, transracial adoptive families may be even more devalued than same race adoptive families; visible racial differences in appearance draw attention to the fact that adoptive parents and children do not share direct genetic ties.

Transracial adoptive families also may be devalued due to negative attitudes about members of racial minority groups. In one study of international adoption by white American parents, children adopted from Latin America and Asia reported receiving many comments about looking different from their parents (Friedlander et al., 2000). White parents who adopt from Latin America or Asia reported greater perceived discrimination than those who adopted from Europe. Level of discrimination reported by parents, in turn, was associated with greater family stress and more child behavior problems (Lee, 2010). Some discriminatory comments may be due to dissimilar parent-child appearance, racism, or both. Some of the discrimination, however, may have been due to xenophobia or attitudes about people from other countries. Accordingly, the present research focuses on Americans’ responses to domestic transracial adoption -- that is, the adoption of American children of color by white American parents.

The current study compared observer reactions to a captioned photograph of an adoptive family featuring white parents holding an infant with either black or white skin. We expected that visible parent-child racial differences based on skin color would affect responses to these families. More specifically, we expected that participants who viewed the transracial adoptive family (featuring a black infant) would report less favorable adoption attitudes, greater negative emotions, and would perceive the parents as less competent than those who viewed the same-race adoptive family photo (featuring a white infant). We also expected that participants’ own racist attitudes would moderate these effects, amplifying negative responses to transracial families.

### Method

Undergraduate students ( $N=167$ , 71% female, average age 19) who self-identified as “White/Caucasian” were recruited for a study of “Attitudes and Perceptions of Different Types of People and Adopted Families.” Participants completed measures of social desirability (Marlowe & Crowne, 1960) and racism (Modern Racism Scale, McConahay, 1986) and then were randomly assigned to view a captioned photo of a white couple adopting either a black or white infant. After viewing the photo, participants completed the short form of the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS) including emotions such as feeling upset, hostile, and afraid. They also completed measures of perceived adoptive parent competency (Parenting Sense of Competence Scale; Johnston & Mash, 1989), and adoption attitudes (Adoption Beliefs Scale; Gibbons et al., 2006).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Zero-Order Correlations Among Study Variables

	1.	2.	3.	4.	<i>M</i>	( <i>SD</i> )	observed range
1. Transracial or same race family	--						
2. Adoption attitudes (ABS)	.17*	--			3.38	(0.34)	2-4
3. Negative emotions (PANAS)	-.18*	-.43***	--		5.74	(2.17)	5-25
4. Parenting competence (PSOC)	.02	.35***	-.41***	--	75.85	(9.36)	28-102
5. Racist attitudes (MRS)	.10	-.33*	.25**	.28***	13.22	(5.20)	7-28

Note: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Possible ranges: ABS: 1-4; PANAS: 5-25; PSOC: 17-102; MRS: 5-35

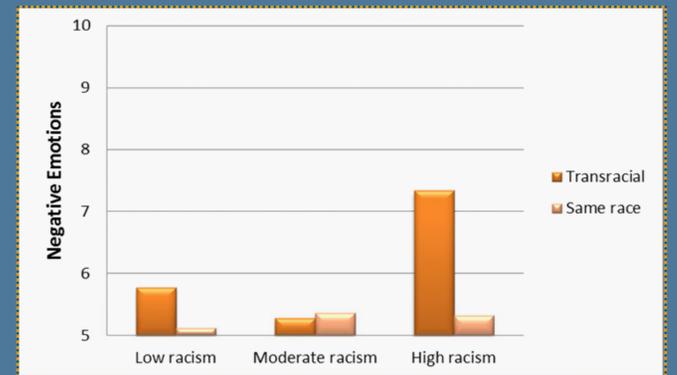


Figure 1: Negative Emotions as a Function of Adoptive Family Condition and Participants’ Racist Attitudes

### Results

Data were discarded from participants who reported misperceiving the child’s race, leaving 71 participants in the same race family photo condition and 96 participants in the transracial family photo condition. Univariate analyses showed that random assignment produced comparable groups. Table 1 lists descriptive statistics and correlations among variables. As expected, participants who viewed the transracial photo reported less positive adoption attitudes ( $M=3.37$ ) than those who viewed the same race photo ( $M=3.47$ ),  $F(1, 164)=5.66$ ,  $p < .05$ . Also, participants who viewed the transracial photo reported greater negative emotions ( $M=6.07$ ) than other participants ( $M=5.30$ ),  $F(1, 164)=6.91$ ,  $p < .01$ . Perceived parental competence did not differ across photo conditions. A three level racist attitude variable (low, moderate, and high) was created using upper and lower quartiles on the MRS racism scale. Unexpectedly, racist attitudes did not significantly interact with photo type to affect adoption attitudes, although there was a main effect of racism; participants higher in racism also reported less favorable adoption attitudes ( $M=3.30$ ) than those lower in racism, ( $M=3.51$ ),  $F(2, 161)=8.10$ ,  $p < .01$ . As expected, racist attitudes interacted with photo type such that more racist participants who viewed the transracial family photo showed the greatest negative emotions (see Figure 1). Racism was also negatively related to perceived parental competence as a main effect; more racist participants perceived both sets of adoptive parents as less competent ( $M=72.16$ ) than less racist participants, ( $M=78.69$ ),  $F(1, 164)=7.40$ ,  $p < .01$ .

Finally, we examined whether the effect of adoptive family type (transracial or same race) on attitudes about adoption could be explained by negative emotions. Hierarchical multiple regressions were conducted. In a first block, family photo type (1 = transracial, 2 = same race), was regressed onto adoption beliefs ( $\beta = .16$ ,  $p < .05$ ), model  $F(1, 165)=4.10$ ,  $p < .05$ . In a second block, negative emotion level was added to the model ( $\beta = -.42$ ,  $p < .001$ ), reducing the beta weight associated with condition ( $\beta = .08$ , ns) and explaining 17% more of the variance in adoption attitudes, overall model  $F(2, 164)=19.38$ ,  $p < .001$ . The mediating path between family photo and adoption attitudes via negative emotion was significant,  $z = -2.15$ ,  $p < .02$  (Preacher & Leonardelli, 2010).

### Discussion

White undergraduates randomly assigned to view a photo of white adoptive parents with a black infant reported greater negative emotions and less positive attitudes towards adoption compared to those who viewed an all white adoptive family. Furthermore, negative emotions fully mediated the effect of transracial family status on adoption attitudes. Those who viewed the transracial adoptive family felt more negatively, and negative feelings predicted disagreement with the practice of adoption in general (Figure 2). Because there were no differences in perceived parental competence across family photo conditions, differences in adoption attitudes were not due to concerns about the parents’ ability to effectively parent a child from a different racial group. Instead, responses to transracial families may be driven by feeling some degree of anxiety, shame, hostility, or other uncomfortable emotions. This is important in understanding why past research shows that transracial families often receive discriminatory comments.

Individual racism also seems to predict how people respond to transracial adoption. The highest rates of negative emotions were reported by those who reported high racism and who viewed the transracially adopted image. It seems intuitive that people with racist attitudes would have more negative reactions to photos involving a black infant. More unexpectedly, people with racist attitudes also have a less favorable view towards adoption in general, including same race adoption. It is possible that people who report racist attitudes are more likely to devalue non-traditional families. For such individuals, a “real” family might necessarily involve a child with shared biological ties with a mother who gave birth after being impregnated by her husband. Other types of nontraditional families, including families created by surrogacy, sperm donation, or with same-sex parents, may also be devalued (Shreffler, Johnson, & Scheuble, 2010; Terrizzi, Shook, & Ventis, 2010).

Participants in this study were not strongly manipulated. Rather, they were simply shown a photo of an adoptive family. Merely viewing an image of a transracial adopted family caused participants to feel more negatively and to devalue adoption. Although these may have been transient effects, such reactions may occur on a greater scale in the real world. Possibly, when encountering transracial adoptive families at parks, restaurants, or other public places, people feel that these families are not quite “right;” they are reminded that the parents and children do not share direct genetic ties. These reactions may even extend to non-adoptive families in which children and parents do share direct genetic ties, such as families with biracial children or children with observable disabilities. Future studies are needed to clarify the conditions under which dissimilar parent-child appearance predicts observer devaluation of that family. Future research also is needed to uncover additional reasons why adoptive families may be devalued.

Photo of Family

Negative Emotions

Negative Adoption Attitudes

Figure 2: Meditational Effect of Negative Emotions on Adoption Attitudes

Transracial Adoptive Family Photo

Same Race Adoptive Family Photo

