Parents’ ethnic identification, attitudes, beliefs and behavior about cultural differences in international transracial adoption

**Tufts University Adoption and Development Project**

Susanne Agerbak, Sing-Yiung Chung, Amanda Young, Xian Zhang, Jodi Wadell, Ellen Pinderhughes

**Background**

- In transracial adoption (TRA), cultural socialization (CS) practices make an important contribution to adoptees’ positive adjustment (Adams, Aweke & Saxe, 2007).
- Recent research has moved deeper to explore how parents’ beliefs and attitudes about cultural differences might affect their engagement in cultural socialization practices (Berbery & O’Brien, 2011, Reddington, 2011).

**Research Question**

- Do parents labeling their family of origin or adoptive family as multi-ethnic:
  - acknowledge cultural or racial differences more;
  - have higher bicultural sensitivity or greater adoption satisfaction;
  - provide a greater variety of cultural socialization activities;
  - have children more likely to label themselves as bi-ethnic than parents who label their families as mono-ethnic?

**Method: Participants**

- Community sample (New England) of 44 families with children adopted from China.
- Parent mean age 51 years; child mean age 7.2 years.

**Results**

- **Family Labels and Quantitative Measures**
  - Family of Origin Ethnic Background
    - Mono (N=30, 68%)
    - Multi (N=14, 32%)
  - Parent Acknowledgement of Cultural Differences
    - Low
    - Mixed
    - High
  - Child’s Ethnic Self-label
    - None
    - Mono-ethnic
    - Multi-ethnic

- **Descriptives**
  - Family of Origin Ethnic Background
    - Mono (30.7%), Multi (25.5%)
  - Parent Acknowledgement of Cultural Differences
    - Low (12.5%), Mixed (36.2%), High (51.3%)
  - Child’s Ethnic Self-label
    - None (13.6%), Mono (28.2%), Multi (58.2%)

- **Examples of family labels**
  - "Entirely um, Anglo. Uh, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant." (mono-ethnic background, mono-ethnic label)
  - "Well, honestly speaking, I mean we are Irish-American in terms of ethnic roots. I grew back five generations built on the Irish and German side..." (two-parent same sex, mixed-ethnic background, mixed-ethnic label)
  - "...from the Midwest, but my background is Irish-German. We tend to emphasise the Irish and not the German..." (mono-ethnic background, multi-ethnic label)

- **Discussion**
  - Adoptive family ethnic label is important. ‘Multi-ethnic’ adoptive families, compared to ‘mono-ethnic’ adoptive families:
    - Acknowledge cultural differences more (but not race differences)
    - Show higher levels of bicultural sensitivity (but not more adoption satisfaction)
    - Provide greater variety of cultural socialization activities
    - Are more likely to have children who self-label “bi-ethnic”.
  - Family of origin ethnic background/label not related to cultural socialization. Possible reasons:
    - Variety of ethnic background experiences and complex influences of multiple factors on parents’ attitudes/behaviors.
    - Ambiguity of language (e.g., “American” used to mean either European ancestry or melding of ethnicities).
    - Impact of evolving experiences over time of raising child of color.
  - But note that Berbery & O’Brien (2011) found that beliefs contributed beyond identity status to cultural socialization.

- **Limitations**
  - Representativeness of sample:
    - Participants all from Southern New England.
  - Recruitment may have under-represented families who do not value cultural socialization or transracial adoptive community connectives.
  - Data collection:
    - Some unstructured nature of interview leaves variation in wording of questions and follow-up discussion.
  - Cross-sectional study:
    - A longitudinal study would offer insight into temporal direction of relations.

- **Implications**
  - For practitioners:
    - Multicultural family of origin background may not prepare parents better to support their children in cultural socialization. Focus on identity and beliefs.
  - Some families may find a TRA greater adjustment to their ethnic identity than others.
  - When working to support child’s ethnic identity, explore family ethnic identity and how that may have changed/not changed as important context for child.

- **For researchers:**
  - Importance of specificity of language re culture, ethnicity, race and labels in interview questions and questionnaires, instructing participants and interpreting responses.
  - Further work required, particularly longitudinal studies, to investigate the complex influences on attitudes to cultural differences for TRA parents, (e.g., whether the salience of parent’s ethnic background or their experience of being a minority are predictive of their attitudes to cultural differences).

**References**

- Ruggles, A. Adoption Conference, 2012. Tufts University Adoption and Development Project. adoptionproject@tufts@gmail.com