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

Tufts University Adoption and Development Project

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Background

- In transracial adoption (TRA), cultural socialization (CS) practices make an important contribution to adoptees’ positive adjustment (Aymar, Awaaw, & Sawa, 2007).
- Recent research has moved deeper to explore how parents’ beliefs and attitudes about cultural differences affect their engagement in cultural socialization practices (Bemey & 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

- There were no significant differences found between adoptive families that label their family of origin or adoptive family as multi-ethnic, compared to those that label their families as mono-ethnic, in terms of:
  - Family of Origin Ethnic Background
  - Family of Origin Ethnic Label
  - Adoptive Family Ethnic Label

- No significant relation was found between adoptive family ethnic label and parents’ racial acknowledgment.

- No significant relation was found between parents’ family of origin ethnic background or label and any qualitative measures.

- Post hoc analyses reveal:
  - Just over half parents label their family as mono-ethnic.
  - Of these, 30% label their adoptive family mono-ethnic and 70% multi-ethnic.
  - 95% parents with multi-ethnic FEOL also label their adoptive family multi-ethnic.

Examples of family labels

- Family of Origin Ethnic Background and Ethnic Label:
  - “Like Irish, Chinese, English American. I mean I guess it’s American...”
  - “Entirely um, Anglo. Uh, white Anglo...”

Family Labels and Quantitative Measures

- Parents who label their adoptive family as multi-ethnic are likely to have higher bicultural sensitivity and provide a greater variety of cultural socialization activities.

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 or label not related to cultural socialization. Possible reasons:
  - Variety of ethnic background experiences and complex influences of multiple factors on parents’ attitudes/behaviors.
  - Amygdaulity of language (e.g., “American” used to mean either European ancestry or melting pot 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.

- Family of origin ethnic label: intriguing relationship to adoptive family ethnic label
  - Mono-ethnic families of origin – 70% identify adoptive family as mono-ethnic.
  - What are the processes that lead these families (and not others) to self-identify as multi-ethnic?

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 connections.

Data collection:

- Self-assessed 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 TRA a 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/dropmed as important context for child.

- For researchers:
  - Importance of specificity of language re culture, ethnicity, race and labels in interviewing 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 parents’ ethnic background or their experience of being a minority are predictive of their attitudes to cultural differences).

References