Identity Development in a Transracial Environment: Racial/Ethnic Minority Adoptees in Minnesota

Emma R. Hamilton, B.S., Diana R. Samek, Ph.D., Margaret A. Keyes, Ph.D., Matt McGue, Ph.D.
Minnesota Center for Twin and Family Research (MCTFR), Department of Psychology, University of Minnesota

Introduction

• Transracial and transethnic adoptees are argued to be at increased risk for problems related to self-esteem and ethnic identity development (Ariéló, 1988; Docan-Morgan, 2011; Hollingsworth, 1997), particularly as adoptive parents are more likely to be white than of color in the U.S. (McRoy, 1989; Simon, 1984).

• Previous studies have found equal adjustment of transracial and same-race adoptees (Brooks & Barff, 1999; Simon, Azis, & Malt, 1994). Other studies have argued that transracial and same-race adoptees have similar levels of self-esteem and self-worth (Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2007; Vroegh, 1997).

• There is also evidence that transracial adoptees experience detriment in racial/ethnic identity, and this in turn may have an indirect influence on adjustment (DellBerry, Scan, & Weinberg, 1996; Feigelman, 2000; Hollingsworth, 1997).

• Communication of race/ethnicity in the transracial adoptive home presents a gap in the research. Because of physical dissimilarity, transracial adoptees become aware of adoptive status at an early age, thus warranting investigation into the ways families support and help manage their child’s development of identity.

Method

• Variables measured included:
  - General Identity: 13-item scale, α = .88
  - Affect Regarding Adoption: 12-item scale, α = .87
  - Curiosity About Birthparents: 10-item scale, α = .86

• Variables measured included:
  - Curiosity About Birthparents: 10-item scale, α = .86
  - Racial/Ethnic Communication: Parent Report (5-item scale, α = .61)

• Variables measured included:
  - Racial/Ethnic Communication: Child Report (5-item scale, α = .59)

• All adoptive parents in our sample were white.

• Racial/Ethnic Minority Adoptees in Minnesota

• The purpose of the present study was to compare transracial and same-race adopted children’s ratings on general identity development, adjustment, and report of communication about race and ethnicity within the parent-child relationship.

Results

• No significant differences were found in 3 of 4 measures of adjustment: antisocial, prosocial, and pro-family behaviors. However, significant differences in aggression were found, F(4, 587) = 3.424, p = .009. Asian adoptees have significantly lower levels of aggressive behaviors than white (p = .002) and Mixed/Other adoptees (p = .01).

• No significant differences were found in 3 of 4 measures of adjustment: antisocial, prosocial, and pro-family behaviors. However, significant differences in aggression were found, F(4, 587) = 3.424, p = .009. Asian adoptees have significantly lower levels of aggressive behaviors than white (p = .002) and Mixed/Other adoptees (p = .01).

• Subsequent analyses were conducted that corrected for non-independence of the data using the COMPLEX specification (clustering by family with Mplus, 6.12 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2014).

• F (4, 544) = 8.701, p < .001. Significantly more communication than white adoptees. Only Asian and Latino adoptees reported talking with their parents about racial/ethnicity significantly more than mothers of white adoptees, F(4, 533) = 34.261, p < .001.

• F (4, 544) = 12.211, p < .001. Fathers of all transracial adoptees reported talking with their child about race/ethnicity significantly more than fathers of white adoptees, F(4, 543) = 12.211, p < .001.

• Asian and Latino adoptees reported talking with their parents about racial/ethnicity significantly more than white adoptees, F(4, 544) = 8.701, p < .001 and F(4, 544) = 8.701, p = .003, respectively. However, Black and Mixed/Others adoptees did not report significantly more communication than white adoptees. Only Asian and Latino adoptees agreed with parent report of R/E. Black and Mixed/Others adoptees did not.

Conclusion

• Our results generally provide support that transracial and same-race adoptees are similar in terms of their overall adjustment, curiosity about birth parents, and general and adoptive identity.

• On the other hand, our results suggest a pattern of disagreement in parent and child perceptions about communication of race/ethnicity across transracial and same-race adoptees. Parents may be over-estimating the degree of communication about race/ethnicity with their Black and Mixed adopted children.

• An important consideration is the widespread color-blindness in the United States, particularly by whites due to the privilege they have experienced in regards to race relations. Race is considered a highly polemic and taboo topic to be avoided in daily conversation (Quiroz, 2007).

• Color-blindness may lead to a skewed parental perception of how often race really is being brought up in the home, or the degree to which it is important to discuss issues about race and ethnicity. Adoptees may be experiencing discrimination among their peers and in other social situations which would warrant a greater need for communication with parents.