

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, (Andujo, 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 & Barth, 1999; Simon, Alstein, & Melli, 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 (DeBerry, Scarr, & 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.

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.

Method

•This study uses data from the Sibling Interaction and Behavior Study (SIBS, McGue et al., 2007) of the Minnesota Center for Twin and Family Research (MCTFR) at the University of Minnesota.

•The sample consisted of 607 adoptees from 357 families.

Transracial sample: $n = 427$ Asian, $n = 28$ Latino, $n = 6$ Black, $n = 20$ Mixed/Other

Same-race sample: $n = 126$ white adoptees
All adoptive parents in our sample were white.

•Measures for this study primarily came from Wave 2 of SIBS (2003-2007), during which thorough measurement of ethnic and adoptive identity was conducted (M age = 18.3 years, $SD = 2.16$).

Research
Supported By

National Institute of Alcohol Abuse grant AA11886
National Institute of Mental Health grant MH66140

References

References available upon request.

Method

•Variables measured included:

General Identity 13-item scale, $\alpha = .88$

Affect Regarding Adoption 12-item scale, $\alpha = .87$

Curiosity About Birthparents 10-item scale, $\alpha = .86$

Adjustment

Prosocial 10-item scale, $\alpha = .79$ for Wave 2 and $\alpha = .73$ for Wave 1

Antisocial 8-item scale, $\alpha = .85$ for Wave 2 and $\alpha = .86$ for Wave 1

Aggression 8-item scale, $\alpha = .87$ for both Wave 2 and Wave 1

Family 8-item scale, $\alpha = .85$ for Wave 2 and $\alpha = .87$ for Wave 1

Racial/Ethnic Communication: Child Report 5-item scale, $\alpha = .59$

Racial/Ethnic Communication: Parent Report 5-item scale, $\alpha = .61$ for mother report and $\alpha = .63$ for father report

•Mean scores were compared across our same-race group and transracial groups using a series of ANOVAs.

•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).

Results

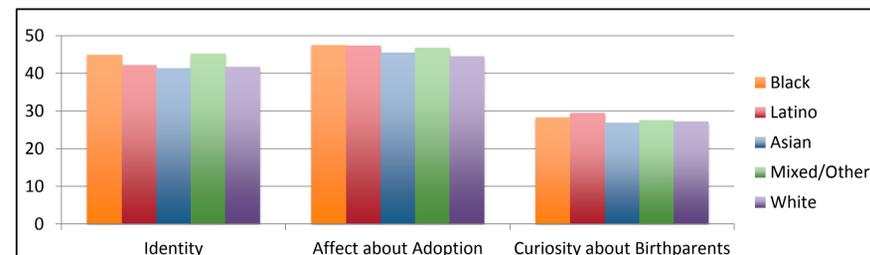


Figure 1. General and Adoptive Identity between Transracial and Same-Race Groups. No significant differences were found in identity, affect about adoption, and wondering about birthparents.

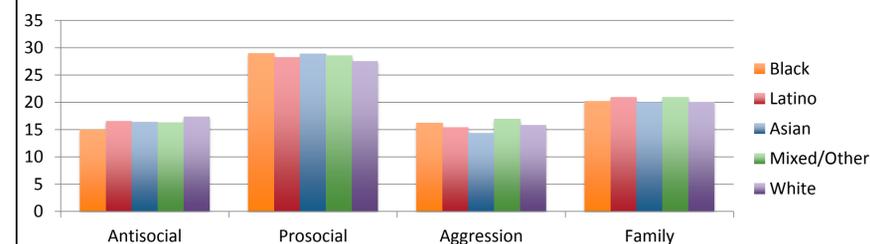


Figure 2. Adjustment between Transracial and Same-Race Groups. No significant differences were found in 3 of 4 measures of adjustment: antisocial, prosocial, and pro-family behaviors. However, significant differences in aggression were found, $F(4, 597) = 3.424, p = .009$. Asian adoptees have significantly lower levels of aggressive behaviors than white ($p = .002$) and Mixed/Other adoptees ($p = .01$).

Results

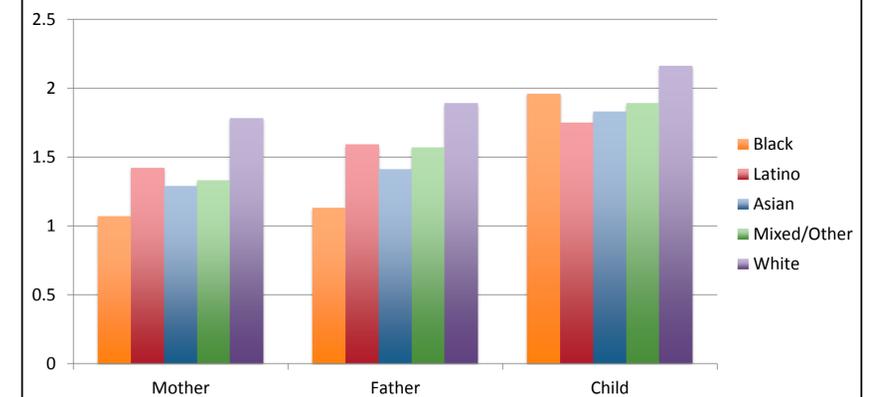


Figure 3. Parent and Child Report of Racial/Ethnic Communication in the Home. Mothers of all transracial adoptees reported talking with their child about race/ethnicity significantly more than mothers of white adoptees $F(4, 533) = 34.261, p < .001$.

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/ethnic 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/Other 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/Other 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.