Abstract

Limited research has examined how transracial adoptive parents navigate their children’s racial groups with the intent of instilling racial pride. This study sought to examine the perceptions and experiences of transracial adoptive parents of their children’s race, in an attempt to understand how they navigate the perceptions of how their child’s racial group reacts to their family, and their perceptions of how their child’s unique racial identity affects their decisions on where to live and where to send their child to school. Findings indicated that many of these parents reported actively choosing to live in diverse communities even if they are not placing their children in diverse schools. Many couples also reported positive interactions with their children’s racial group, however, some heterosexual couples indicated they felt alienated and at judged by member of their children’s race. Findings have implications for practitioners working with transracial adoptive families.

Introduction

Transracial adoption is becoming increasingly common in the United States. In 2016, over 60,000 children were adopted, and of those more than half a million children in the United States have been adopted transracially (Creel-Simon & Vink, 2012). Due to the number of racially diverse children in need of adoption and the number of families willing to pursue such adoptions, research on transracial adoptive families is crucial to understanding the dynamics of families and how to best create a healthy environment for the child.

Findings from research indicate that transracial adoption can, in some cases, create a sense of internal conflict and confusion for the parents (Samuels, 2009). Children may face many questions from strangers both the uniqueness of their families and attempting to understand what makes these families different. In order to combat these challenges, parents must learn the strategies needed to navigate their child’s racial world in order to ensure their child does not feel like they are not enough like the parents such that their unique racial identity is not recognized.

Racial socialization is an important part of an adoptee’s identity formation. The role of racial socialization is to provide information, and definitions of the parents’ racial group and to help the child understand the dynamics of racial socialization (Cawton, 2009). Preparation for racism and discrimination, an important part of racial socialization, allows for the child to perceive racial attacks. For instance, if a child expects to encounter racist attacks, then the child can experience significant stress but not perceive that stress as racism if racism is not as prevalent as a part of their racial socialization (Lecky, 2013). Adoptive parents’ own racial views influence the methods they use (or fail to use) to help their children construct meaningful, diverse environments for their children (Smith, Juarez, & Jacobson, 2011). The child needs to see enough like the parents such that their unique racial identity is not recognized. This parent’s comment reveals how these disapprovals are often interpreted and influence how the parents view and interact with that racial community.

Method

Participants

Data for the current study came from the Transition to Adoptive Parent Project (TAPP), a longitudinal study examining transracial, gay, and heterosexual adoptive families (Goldberg, 2010). From the larger sample of adoptive families, 10 gay couples, 45 lesbian couples, 60 gay male couples, 50 gay male couples, seven heterosexual, seven lesbian, and seven gay couples were randomly selected. Inclusion criteria for these couples included that they were all White and had adopted children of a different race from themselves (see Table 1 for demographics).

Procedure

Parents were interviewed over the phone by the principal investigator and trained graduate students. Analysis focused on the following themes: low questions, which the parents use to teach their child to navigate social encounters (post-adoption placement) and Time 6 (5 years post-placement) of the larger study. We examined if there was a difference between the sites on how they interact with members of their child’s race.

Results

Themes ordered by participants (see Table 2) and broken down by family type. Findings indicate that many parents were active agents in constructing meaningful, diverse environments for their children, while others struggled to have positive interactions with their children’s racial group.

Perceptions of Children’s Racial Group

Children’s Racial Group/Adoptive Friend

Most parents reported that their child’s racial group was welcoming to their family. Specifically, five heterosexual couples (three Asian, one Black, one White) reported these positive experiences. Many of these parents indicated that people of their child’s race were thrilled to see the baby and smiled when they saw the family out together. For instance, one lesbian mom of a half African American, third Asian, a third Black. Her teacher’s “Black” she loved her and encouraged her to learn about her heritage. While these parents did not necessarily make the planned effort to get their child in a diverse school, their child’s experiences there inadvertently created a welcoming environment for them.

Conclusion

This study illustrates that many of these transracial adoptive parents are active agents in the creation of diverse environments for their children. They also report that they have been able to navigate successfully and allowing, for meaningful conversation to occur that could facilitate the racial socialization of the child. However, some of the heterosexual couples report being stigmatized by members of their child’s race. Other parents report that their child looked enough like the parents such that their unique racial identity was not readily apparent. Any conversations about the child’s different race were less likely to occur. These results have important practical implications for researchers who wish to instill the importance of transracial adoptive parents that they have the strength, tools, and resources to raise a child of a different race.

References


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