

Instilling Racial Pride: Transracial Adoptive Parents Navigating their Children’s Racial Groups

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Abstract

Limited research has explored how transracial adoptive parents navigate their children’s racial groups with the intent of instilling racial pride and knowledge. This qualitative study examines the degree to which 7 lesbian, 7 gay, and 7 heterosexual couples (42 individuals) feel accepted by members of their child’s race, their 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 couples reported actively choosing to live in diverse communities and intentionally 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 stared at and 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. Over the past four decades alone, 4,800,000 children have been adopted, and of these more than half a million children in the United States have been adopted transracially (Crolley-Simic & Vonk, 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 such 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 children (Samuels, 2009). Children may face many questions from strangers both praising the uniqueness of their families and stigmatizing them. In order to combat these challenges, parents must learn the strategies needed to navigate their child’s racial world in order to pass them on to the adoptee and foster a strong racial identity.

Racial socialization is an important part of an adoptee’s identity formation. The process involves negotiating race in relation to self and others and defining racial identity dependent on messages received about race, racism, and stereotypes (Terhune, 2009). Preparation for racism and discrimination, an important part of racial socialization, affects how a child perceives racial attacks. For instance, if a child is prepared for these attacks, that child might experience significant stress but not perceive that stress as traumatically as a child with no preparation (Leslie, Smith, & Hrapczynski, 2013). Adoptive parents’ own racial views influence the methods they use (or fail to use) in helping their children to establish a healthy racial identity (Crolley-Simic & Vonk, 2012). Research suggests that parents must disconnect from their own White privilege in order to better foster healthy racial identity development in their children (Smith, Juarez, & Jacobson, 2011).

Much of this research fails to identify specific methods that parents utilize while raising these transracial adoptees, especially in terms of how they interact with members of their child’s race. Without this research, there are gaps in the understanding of how caregivers can best go about socializing their children to have pride in their racial backgrounds and give them the tools they need to interact with their racial communities. The goal of the current study is to investigate through a social constructionist framework (Crotty, 1998; Schwandt, 2000) how transracial adoptive parents navigate their children’s racial communities with the intention of instilling racial knowledge and pride.

Research Questions

1. To what extent do White adoptive parents feel accepted by members of their children’s race?
2. According to parents, how do people who share the child’s race react to the family?
3. According to parents, has the child’s race influenced them to move to a different geographic location?
4. What role, if any, did the child’s race play in parents’ decision-making about where to send their child to school?

Method

Participants

Data for the current study come from the Transition to Adoptive Parenthood Project (TAPP) a longitudinal study examining lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive couples (Goldberg, 2010). From the larger sample of approximately 70 heterosexual couples, 60 lesbian couples, and 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 were White and had adopted children of a different race from themselves (see Table 1 for demographics).

Table 1: *Demographics*

	Gay couples (<i>M, SD, or n; % of total couples</i>) <i>n</i> =7	Lesbian couples (<i>M, SD, or n; % of total couples</i>) <i>n</i> =7	Heterosexual couples (<i>M, SD, or n; % of total couples</i>) <i>n</i> =7	Total sample (<i>M, SD, or n; % of total couples</i>) <i>n</i> =21
State/country parents adopted from				
Texas	1 (14.29%)	1 (14.29%)	0 (0%)	2 (9.52%)
California	3 (42.86%)	1 (14.29%)	0 (0%)	4 (19.05%)
Maryland	0 (0%)	1 (14.29%)	0 (0%)	1 (4.29%)
Arizona	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (14.29%)	1 (4.29%)
Mississippi	1 (14.29%)	2 (28.57%)	4 (57.14%)	7 (33.33%)
Ohio	1 (14.29%)	0 (0%)	1 (14.29%)	2 (9.52%)
Massachusetts	0 (0%)	1 (14.29%)	0 (0%)	1 (4.29%)
China	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (28.57%)	2 (9.52%)
Korea	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (14.29%)	1 (4.29%)
Vietnam	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (14.29%)	1 (4.29%)
Canada	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (14.29%)	1 (4.29%)
Guatemala	0 (0%)	2 (28.57%)	0 (0%)	2 (9.52%)
Type of adoption				
Public, domestic	1 (14.29%)	1 (4.76%)	0 (0%)	2 (9.52%)
Open, domestic	5 (71.43%)	4 (57.14%)	3 (42.86%)	12 (57.14%)
International	1 (14.29%)	2 (28.57%)	4 (57.14%)	7 (33.3%)
Child’ s race				
Multiracial	1 (14.29%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (4.29%)
White and African America or Hispanic, Caucasian and African American	1 (14.29%)	1 (14.29%)	0 (0%)	2 (9.52%)
African American	1 (14.29%)	0 (0%)	1 (14.29%)	2 (9.52%)
Latino/Hispanic	3 (42.86%)	1 (14.29%)	0 (0%)	4 (19.05%)
Asian, Chinese	1 (14.29%)	0 (0%)	4 (57.14%)	5 (23.81%)
Caucasian/Latino, Caucasian/Hispanic	0 (0%)	1 (14.29%)	1 (14.29%)	2 (9.52%)
Biracial, multiracial	1 (14.29%)	3 (42.86%)	1 (14.29%)	5 (23.81%)
Mayan	0 (0%)	1 (14.29%)	0 (0%)	1 (4.76%)
Child’ s age in years at Phase 6	4.57 (0.53)	5.86 (2.34)	4.71 (0.76)	5.05 (1.50)
Family (combined) income at Phase 6	\$184,285.71 (\$66,359.41)	\$125,285.71 (\$34,745.33)	\$107,142.86 (\$31,471.83)	\$138,90476 (\$55,849.71)
Parent age in years at Phase 6	46.57 (5.86)	46.43 (6.95)	41. (6.06)	44.67 (6.54)

Procedure

Participants were interviewed over the phone by the principal investigator and trained graduate students. Analysis focused on the following interview questions, which were asked at Time 2 (3 months post-adoptive placement) and Time 6 (5 years post-placement) of the larger longitudinal study:

- 1.How have people reacted to the fact that the parents are two White people raising a child of a different race?
- 2.Have the parents felt accepted by members of their child’ s race/culture?
- 3.What challenges did the parents encounter in deciding upon a school for their child?
- 4.Do the parents socialize with other families/people who share their child’ s race?

Inductive semantic thematic analysis, or identifying themes that best represent the participants’ experiences, was used to interpret the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher familiarized himself with the data, generated initial codes, analyzed those codes into overarching themes, and then placed the individual codes in relation to those themes.

Results

Themes endorsed by participants (see Table 2) are 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 groups.

Table 2: *Parent Responses to Research Questions*

Amount of perceived acceptance	Gay couples (<i>n; % of total couples</i>) <i>n</i> =0	Lesbian couples (<i>n; % of total couples</i>) <i>n</i> =2	Heterosexual couples (<i>n; % of total couples</i>) <i>n</i> =5	Total number of couples (<i>n; % of total couples</i>) <i>n</i> =7
Child’ s racial group is welcoming and friendly	0 (0%)	2 (100.00%)	3 (60.00%)	8 (71.43%)
Reactions	Gay couples (<i>n; % of total couples</i>) <i>n</i> =4	Lesbian couples (<i>n; % of total couples</i>) <i>n</i> =2	Heterosexual couples (<i>n; % of total couples</i>) <i>n</i> =5	Total number of couples (<i>n; % of total couples</i>) <i>n</i> =11
The child looks enough like the parents so that the public does not notice	2 (50.00 %)	2 (100.00%)	2 (40.00 %)	6 (54.55%)
They stare at the family	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (60.00%)	3 (27.27%)
Diversity of location	Gay couples (<i>n; % of total couples</i>) <i>n</i> =5	Lesbian couples (<i>n; % of total couples</i>) <i>n</i> =5	Heterosexual couples (<i>n; % of total couples</i>) <i>n</i> =6	Total number of couples (<i>n; % of total couples</i>) <i>n</i> =16
The area is already diverse	3 (60.00%)	3 (60.00%)	2 (33.33%)	8 (50.00%)
Choosing the child’ s school	Gay couples (<i>n; % of total couples</i>) <i>n</i> =6	Lesbian couples (<i>n; % of total couples y</i>) <i>n</i> =6	Heterosexual couples (<i>n; % of total couples</i>) <i>n</i> =5	Total number of couples (<i>n; % of total couples</i>) <i>n</i> =17
The school was already diverse	2 (33.33%)	3 (33.33%)	1 (20.00%)	1 (35.29%)

Note. Total number of couples refers to the number of couples in the sample who had answers relevant to the research question.

Perceptions of Child’s Racial Group

Child’s Racial Group is Welcoming and Friendly

Most participants reported that their child’s racial group was welcoming to the family. Specifically, five couples (two lesbian, three heterosexual) 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 heterosexual mom of a one year-old Chinese daughter said that:

And it was just me and [child] and they looked at me and they looked at the baby and they said, is that your baby? And I said yes, and they said, is she adopted? And I said yes she is. And they were, you could tell they were from the mainland and they had come here, they were delighted. They were so good, they were so nice to me, they were nice to the baby. They were like, oh she’s a lucky girl! And I was like, no no we’re lucky, she’s a good kid!

Parent Feels S/He is Being Judged by Members of Child’s Racial Group

Three heterosexual couples indicated that they felt judged by members of their child’s racial group. These parents reported that many people seemed to look at their family with disapproval. One heterosexual mother stated that, **“I was very conscious of it though, they didn’t approve, they didn’t like me with him. And that was sort of this thing where I was like, ‘Well, you can judge all you like.’”** This parent’s comment reveals how these disapprovals are oftentimes readily apparent and influence how the parents view and interact with that racial community.

Child’s Race Not Perceived by Outsiders as Different From Parents

Two gay, two lesbian, and two heterosexual couples reported that the child, despite being of a different race, looked enough like the parents such that strangers/outside did not notice any differences in skin color. Most of the children even went as far as to pass as biological children. One lesbian mom of a half African American, half Caucasian infant indicated that, **“I don’t anticipate it will affect us much because most people think he’s my biological child, he looks like me.”** This parent emphasized that because her son looks like her, she did not expect to receive any reactions from her child’s race.

Parents Report “Stares” and “Looks” by Members of Child’s Racial Group

Many of the parents did not have such positive interactions with members of their child’s racial group. Three heterosexual couples shared stories of when they found people who shared their child’s race staring at their family in public places. One heterosexual parent of a six year-old Vietnamese son even described how one woman disrupted a public shopping area while she stared in awe at the family:

So we were at Costco way too long. And this woman, maybe mid-fifties, Chinese... definitely Chinese. She stopped in the middle of the row and didn’t move. Like blocking everybody. I mean, it was Christmas time (laughs). She just stood there!

Moving to Diverse Communities

Three gay couples, three lesbian couples, and two heterosexual couples stated that the area they lived in was already diverse enough for their child to have exposure to people of his or her race. One gay dad of a five year-old African American son explained that, **“In our school district it’s really not an issue because we have a—I mean our minority students are the majority in our district so there**

are so many you know minority students and interracial students, or you know mixed students. Kids really don’t think anything of it.”

Choosing a Diverse School

Some families’ first choice school was already diverse and welcoming (two gay couples, three lesbian couples, and one heterosexual couple). One participant said: **“It’ s a nice diverse community. In her classroom it’ s about a third Caucasian, a third Asian, a third Black. Her teacher’ s Black, I love her teacher. It’ s a nice mix of kids. She is doing well there...”** While these parents did not necessarily make the planned effort to put their child in a diverse school, their child’ s experiences there inevitably 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 their child’ s racial group is friendly and welcoming, allowing for meaningful conversation to occur that could facilitate the racial socialization of the child. However, some of the heterosexual couples report being stared at by members of their child’ s racial group. Other parents reported that their child looked enough like the parents such that their unique racial identity was not readily apparent; thus, any conversations about the child’ s different race were less likely to occur. These results have many practical implications for researchers who wish to instill the confidence in transracial adoptive parents that they have the strength, tools, and resources to raise a child of a different race.

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