Same Race Adoption Among African-Americans:

A Ten-Year Empirical Review

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A Ten-Year Empirical Review

The past ten years have seen a surge in efforts to eliminate the protection of same-race adoption of African-American children. The purpose of this paper is to summarize the history of this issue, to report relevant research findings, and to anticipate future research directions.

History

A 1972 resolution by the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) strongly opposed the trend toward the transracial adoption of African-American children. According to NABSW, such transracially-adopted children were prevented from developing a positive sense of themselves as black people which would be necessary to cope with the racism and prejudice which they would eventually encounter. Following the NABSW resolution, a commitment to encouraging same race adoptions began. In response, many public and private agencies modified their policies and practices to prioritize same race adoption, as did child welfare organizations such as the Child Welfare League of America in 1968 (as cited in McRoy, 1989). It was widely believed that although African Americans tended to adopt informally in large numbers (Hill, 1977), they had frequently been excluded from formal adoption through traditional agencies. Herzog, Sudia, Harwood, and Newcomb (1971) reported that only 39 non-white homes were approved for every 100 non-white children reported as needing adoptive placement, compared to 116 white homes for every 100 white children available.

Other changes followed this new emphasis on encouraging same-race adoptions. For example, in some cities separate agencies or separate programs within traditional agencies were established to facilitate the adoption of African-American children by African-American parents. Homes for Black Children in Detroit was among the first of many. Additionally, several early studies investigated adoptions of African-American children by African-American parents. From a study of twenty-four adoption agencies in Washington, D. C. and Baltimore, Day (1979) reported systemic factors which resulted in low rates of agency acceptance and placement of Black children for adoption and service-delivery factors which were associated with successes in increasing Black adoptive placements. Herzog et al. reported the opinions of 100 key respondents in five large U. S. cities regarding African Americans' reasons for adopting, as well as

deterrents to, and facilitators of same race adoption among African Americans. Finally, in 1971, Lawder, Hoopes, Andrews, & Lower (as cited in Hairston and Williams, 1989) provided a comparative description of African Americans who adopted through traditional versus subsidized programs.

By 1975, and following the increased emphasis on finding same-race adopters, 70 nonwhite homes were approved for adoption per 100 available nonwhite children (Haring, as cited in McRoy, 1989), compared to the 39 per 100 noted earlier, seeming to confirm the argument that African-American adopters could be found if sought. The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (1981) provided economic subsidies to further facilitate the adoption of children with special needs and children of ethnic minority groups were included in this category.

In the meantime, opponents of protective policies for same-race adoptions stepped up their opposition, interpreting such policies as reverse racism (McRoy, 1989). In some cases, White foster parents who were restricted from adopting African-American children in their care, sought legal redress through the courts (McRoy, 1989) and some adoption-support organizations became involved in the effort. In October, 1995, the Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994 (1995) took effect. This law prohibited agencies engaged in adoption and receiving federal funds from holding up the placement of a child because of race considerations. At the same time, the law provided that such considerations could be made if they were believed to be in the best interests of the child. However, as of the writing of this paper, the U. S. House of Representatives has passed a bill [HR 3286 (1996)] which would restrict such agencies from considering race under any circumstances unless two equally qualified parents were available simultaneously. If this most recent bill is voted into law, it will be necessary that those wishing to protect the same-race adoption of African-American children strengthen efforts to increase the availability of African-American adoptive parents. Research is important which studies factors which are associated with adoption by African-American families. Only a few have been conducted. The focus of these will be discussed below.

Characteristics of Adopters

African-Americans who adopt have consistently been found to be highly educated. In a national survey of 53 such families, Hairston and Williams (1989) found that 75% had at least a college degree and 32% had completed graduate school. Similarly, in a study by Hollingsworth (1995) comparing adopters and non-adopters in one midwestern state, 57% of the 48 adopters had graduated from college and 19% had completed graduate school. Also, 7

of the 12 African-American adoptive parents studied by Prater and King (1988) had completed college and 5 had earned advanced degrees, and of the ten African-American adoptive participants in Pollard's (1990) qualitative study, 5 had bachelor's degrees and 4 of those also had Master's degrees.

Similar findings have occurred with respect to <u>income</u>. One-third of adopters in the Hollingsworth (1995) study had household incomes of $35,000 and above as did "over one-half" of those studied by Hairston and Williams (1989). Four of the ten adoptive families studied by Prater and King (1988) had annual family incomes greater than $50,000. [Families in Pollard's (1990) study designated only socioeconomic class.]

While most African-American adopters are married, a substantial number are <u>divorced or single, never-married</u> [30% in Hollingsworth's (1995) study, 29% in the study by Hairston and Williams (1989), and 50% of Pollard's (1990) participants.] Three of the 12 adopters studied by Prater and King (1988) were unmarried.

In those studies where data were gathered regarding <u>religious affiliation and practice</u>, religion continues to appear as a significant element in the lives of African-American adopters. Only 6% of adopters who responded anonymously in the Hollingsworth (1995) study reported having no religious affiliation and of those designating a religion, 56% attended religious activities once per week or less, 22% attended two times per week and 22% reported that they attended such activities three or more times per week. All participants in the Prater and King (1988) study designated a religious affiliation. Finally, only one respondent in the Pollard (1990) study designated having no religion and 6 of the remaining nine reported church attendance once weekly while two reported attending church more than once a week.

In terms of family circumstances in which the adoption occurred, <u>number of children adopted</u> and <u>presence of biological children</u> tend to be frequently of interest. Of adopters in the Hollingsworth (1995) study, 17% adopted more than one child while 2 of the 12 adopters studied by Prater and King (1988) adopted two or more. The other two studies did not report these data separately, although Hairston and Williams (1989) reported that only 39% of their sample had only one child. Additionally, 38% of adopters studied by Hollingsworth (1995) had biological children as did 4 of the 10 adopters in Pollard's (1990) study.

A final, though important characteristic is what adopters report as their <u>primary motivation to adopt</u>. These data are difficult to analyze since they have been collected differently in different studies. For instance, Hollingsworth

(1995) asked respondents for their primary reason (only one choice was allowed) for having contacted an adoption agency originally. In subsequent analysis, these were categorized as parent-centered and child-centered. Hairston and Williams (1989) allowed respondents to report multiple reasons that they considered primary in their adoption decision and counted frequencies. Prater and King (1988) similarly allowed more than one choice and analyzed frequencies. In Pollard's study, participants responded to open-ended questions in a semi-structure interview, including: "How did you decide to adopt?" and "What do you feel influenced you to adopt?" Respondent's were asked to rank order their responses to the latter question in terms of importance. Fifty-six percent in the Hollingsworth (1995) study cited parent-centered reasons, with 40% specifying infertility. Similarly, 50% of Hairston and Williams (1989) respondents gave inability to have birth children, although 70% also reported wanting to give a child a permanent home. Prater and King (1988) report that the 9 of the 12 respondents in their study gave inability to have children biologically as their reason for adopting, leading these researchers to interpret this as respondents' primary reason. Pollard (1990) reports that child-centered reasons were mentioned by eight out of the ten respondents in her study, while parent-centered reasons were mentioned by nine out of the ten respondents. No data are reported on prioritizing of the responses.

Experiences With Adoption Agencies

Of the studies reported above, only Hairston and Williams (1989) and Hollingsworth (1995) collected information regarding the influence of African-American adopters' experiences with the placement agency in their decision to adopt. Hairston and Williams found that respondents in their sample cited most frequently intake and orientation sessions, home visits, and individual and family interviews. Hollingsworth (1995), asked the 44 non-adopters in her study to respond to an open-ended question regarding their main reason for not adopting. Their reasons were categorized as personal-centered and agency-centered. Of the responses that could be clearly categorized, 84% gave personal-centered reasons. [In some instances, these could possibly have been addressed through such agency efforts as public education (for example, fearing the disapproval of family members).]

Cultural Heritage Considerations

The influence of cultural heritage and tradition has recently been considered in studies of motivation of African Americans to adopt. Pollard (1990) questioned whether some child-centered motivators were indicative of ethnic heritage and Hairston and Williams (1989) mentioned the importance of cultural sensitivity in recruitment activities.

Hollingsworth (1995) found that two variables on a measure of Africentricity, combined with primary reason for contacting an adoption agency initially, significantly predicted adoption.

In summary, highly-educated African-Americans and those with substantial incomes should continue to be targets of adoption recruitment efforts, although such efforts should not be restricted to this group. Similarly, programs which direct adoption recruitment to African-American churches and religious organizations should be continued. Continuing attention should also be paid to the unmarried as potential adopters and persons who have already adopted or who have biological children should not be omitted. Creative methods may be considered for focusing some recruitment measures on how adoption meets the parent-centered needs of adopters. Finally, attention should continue to be given to attitudes and values which may influence the informal practices of adoption workers and to insuring that bias regarding race, class, or marital status does not influence eligibility decisions.

Future Research Directions

Courtney, Barth, Berrick, Brooks, Needell and Park (1996), citing evidence of inequities by race in services to children and families in the child welfare system, recommend that race be included as an explanatory variable in research designs in child welfare. Such research is needed, not only in studying the demographic characteristics which are associated with adoption among African Americans but in identifying which recruitment activities are most successful and what supports and barriers to adoption may operate within African-American families, in African-American communities, and in the larger society. Research needs to continue to be directed to identifying the factors which account for the overrepresentation of African-American children in the child welfare system and to determining the preventive practices which are most successful in reversing this reality.

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