READING BETWEEN THE LINES: BLACK-WHITE HERITAGE AND TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION

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Introduction

From 1980 to 1990 the number of biracial babies born with black-white heritage increased 500% according to the 1990 Census (Root, 1996). By Census 2000, approximately 6.8 million respondents claimed more than one racial/ethnic heritage, and multiracial births became the third largest category of all births in the U.S. (Myers & Hacegaba, 2001; U.S. Census, 2000). Multiraciality is not a new phenomenon. In fact, the politically and socially complex history of persons of black-white descent in the U.S. (hereafter referred to as biracial) is well documented (Davis, 1991; Favor, 1999; Williamson, 1980). Yet, current statistics revealing the existence of a growing population who self-reports an identification with more than one race have provided multiracials and others additional evidence for calling into question the continued legitimacy of North American constructions of race[1] as mutually exclusive group memberships (Leary, 1997; Root, 1996; Senna, 1998). Likewise, through the establishment of formal organizations and national conferences, multiracial Americans for the first time have begun to further articulate their "rights" to be racially self-determining outside of monocentric categories (Root, 1996).

It is important to note, however, that this "multiracial movement" has often been met with great opposition—suggesting that racial self-determination for multiracial persons has consequences that extend beyond the realm of one's right to officially record any constellation of racial heritages or identities. Concerns range from noting broad social, political, and cultural implications for the communities of color with which multiracial persons share a heritage, to predicting the myriad hazards of interpreting this new Census data—particularly the consequences of its use to

[1] The use of race and pan-racial designations (e.g., black, biracial) in this paper acknowledges that many social scientists and anthropologists consider race to be socially constructed—a biological fiction (Zack, 1993). Yet this discussion also recognizes that its acceptance in society as master status in framing and essentializing persons in terms of a race produces real interpersonal and intrapersonal consequences for racialized populations. Therefore, racialized labels and language will not be used as proxies for any single or matching identity, ethnicity, or culture; these labels will not be capitalized.

determine funding for social service programs (Dalmage, 2000; Daniel, 2002; Leary, 1997).

Not surprisingly, these socio-political realities surrounding multiracial populations and their identities have also fueled a bourgeoning literature authored predominately by multiracial persons seeking to reframe traditional understandings of race and identity in ways that recognize these and other factors (Dalmage, 2000; O'Hearn, 1999; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002; Root, 1992, 1996). This literature often mirrors more postmodern frameworks in the social sciences that have theorized race and identity as a fluid and context-driven process as opposed to a fixed stage-based taxonomy (Anzaldúa, 1987; Coleman, Norton, Miranda, & McCubbin, 2003; Renn, 1998; Zack, 1993). It is, therefore, interesting to note that as the nation struggles with how best to quantify and acknowledge the micro-diversity of mixed race, and social science literature is expanding its conceptualizations of race and identity, child welfare policy and practice have officially embraced colorblindness.

The early 1990's witnessed a reconsideration of the significance of race and culture in adoption when a small group of transracial adoption researchers, adoptive/foster parents, and transracial adoption advocates successfully pushed to eliminate race as a relevant factor in determining the best interests of children available for adoption. The Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA, P.L. 103-382, 1994) and its amendments within the Interethnic Adoption Provisions (IEAP, P.L. 104-188, 1996) now enforce a standard of "colorblindness" in the adoption process, and a clear promotion of transracial adoption as a solution for moving the disproportionate numbers of foster children of black descent into adoptive homes (Freundlich, 2000; Howe, 1997; Maybry, 1996). It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that although biracial children have typically dominated the samples of transracial adoption studies involving adoptees of black descent (Miranda, 2003), the most contemporary child welfare literature and research is only beginning to mention any unique experiences among the transracial adoptees of mixed racial heritage in their samples (see Barn, 1999; Folaron & Hess, 1993; Hollingsworth, 1997; Patton, 2000). Consequently, despite the growing literature that clearly establishes multiraciality as engendering a unique process of identity development, few have explored in-depth this group's cultural or racial identity experiences in the context of white adoptive families or in ways that build upon more recent identity literature.

Understanding how the cultural or race-related best interests of biracial children will now be defined and addressed by adoptive parents and child welfare professionals in the context of these policies and racial identity politics has implications for adoptive families and, ultimately, for the well-being of the adoptees. This paper is a call to researchers to reposition the politics of race, transracial adoption, and identity development as contextual factors to be explored through research, as opposed to the force that drives their research. It is also a call to those who seek alternative

understandings of "healthy" identity to recognize the various contexts in which racialized identities are constructed and lived. So doing will provide a necessary framework for exploring new research questions that examine the complexities of race and transracial adoption beyond mutually exclusive outcomes as solely a good or bad family typology, or over generalize it as a harmful or successful adoption practice. Ultimately, it is hoped this proposed new body of research can offer findings that are culturally relevant to the ways in which race is experienced by this specific population.

Biraciality and Adoption

At first glance of the literature one could argue little is known in the child welfare arena about this growing population of biracial Americans, and that their current or historical experiences in the child welfare system are insignificant. Traditionally they have not been considered a distinct population from other transracial adoptees of black descent. A closer read, however, reveals a very deliberate consideration of race and skin tone in the placement process by both child welfare workers and adopters (Folaron & Hess, 1993; Kornitzer, 1952; McRoy & Grape, 1999; Miranda, 2002). It is argued here that deliberately mining the literature to unearth some of the experiences among biracial adoptees provides both compelling and timely evidence to support the future study of their racial/cultural identity development as unique.

The first wave of transracial adoptions in the U.S. involving children of black descent was biracial children (Davis, 1991; Day, 1979). In fact, the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) constructed an official stance on the best interests of this population, recommending placements in homes that most closely reflected their individual racial appearances (CWLA, 1958). Recognizing that the skin tone of some infants with black heritage changes with age and may be extremely light at birth, from 1947 to 1961 the University of Minnesota's Genetic Institute was consulted on the future racial appearances of 26 biracial infants (Day, 1979). It is important to note that the placement of "white appearing" biracial infants with white families was initially not understood as transracial. However, when "mistakes" were made, some white families did choose to keep their adopted biracial children whose darkening complexions made public their adoptive family status. Consequently, agencies began to court white adopters with television advertisements for "part-white" or "racially mixed" babies, hoping others might consider this population in light of their unmet initial racial preference for white infants (McRoy & Zurcher, 1983).

Both researchers and practitioners continue to note this ongoing mismatch between the preference among the majority of today's formal adopters who are white, the unavailability of matching numbers of healthy white infants, and the consequences this creates for available biracial infants (Bertelsen, 2002, McRoy & Grape, 1999). Arguably, lighter skin may continue to affect the placement trajectories for children

whose phenotypes more closely match the requests of white adopters and even some middle-class black couples (Daley, 1990; McRoy & Grape, 1999). Moreover, it is not a secret that some agencies charge adopters different fees for infants based on the child's "adoptability," again placing healthy biracial infants in a racial (and monetary) hierarchy above infants who have darker skin and/or those whose phenotypes are perceived stereotypically as black (Bertelsen, 2002; Schabner, 2002). Clearly, not all adoptive candidates have a desire for light skinned babies, nor do all agencies market available children based upon their skin tones or racial heritages. However, despite changes in Census 2000, there still are no requirements for agencies to consistently report racial heritage.[2] Consequently, it remains impossible for anyone to substantiate the national prevalence of this phenomenon or any placement trends for biracial children. Therefore, additional clues regarding the significance of this population in the world of transracial adoption must be gleaned from a review of studies involving children of black descent.

Transracial Adoption Research and Biracial Adoptees

Biracial adoptees have always existed in the samples of transracial adoption research, particularly within some of the most frequently cited and well-known contributions to this field. Adoptees of black-white descent comprised 82% of Grow and Shapiro's (1974) sample, 73% of McRoy and Zurcher's (1983) transracial adoptee sample, 68% of Simon's (1996) phase four sample, and 78% of the respondents in Vroegh's (1997) study. Not surprisingly, the most recent studies on domestic transracial adoption continue this trend; a minimum of 73% of the respondents in these studies was biracial (see Patton, 2000; Simon & Roorda, 2000). However, despite recent calls for the separate study of racial identity domains for this population (Hollingsworth, 1997; Miranda, 2003), a burgeoning field of theory and research on multiracial identity (Dalmage, 2000; O'Hearn, 1999; Root, 1992, 1996, 1998; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002), and the enduring concerns about the identity outcomes of transracial adoptees (Howe, 1995, 1997; Folaron & Hess, 1993; McRoy & Hall, 1995; Steinberg, 1998; Steinberg & Hall, 1998), this body of inquiry has yet

[2] In fact, an interesting illustration of this casual treatment of race in the child welfare arena exists in more recent reports of adopters, clearly a group for whom racial information seems most easily accessible. According to statistics on adoptive candidates in 1998 (CWLA), the third largest group of adopters falls under the "unknown" racial category. Consequently, it is not clear if "unknown" represents a lack of (or discomfort in) inquiring about the race of adopters who appear racially ambiguous, or the outright disregard of this information during the adoption intake process.

to fully transcend reporting primarily racial preferences and racial labels as its key proxy measures of racial identity outcomes for transracial adoptees as a monolithic population.

An in-depth exploration of the myriad historical, socio-political, and methodological reasons for this treatment of racial identity in general, and biraciality in particular, is beyond the scope of this paper.[3] As noted, research has been limited by flawed or incomplete national statistics on race and placement experiences within both private and public adoption arenas. It also bears noting, however, that this body of research has been constrained by the unyielding politics attached to transracial adoption (Courtney, 1997) and the research questions pursued — with outcomes becoming proof of this placement type as either a complete success or a complete failure. Consequently, findings related to racial identity frequently become secondary to outcomes related to self-esteem, school achievement, and adoptees' perceived adjustments to their adoptive homes (Miranda, 2000). In some cases, this body of research has ignored its own findings that also support public concerns regarding the adoptees' abilities to form positive identifications with their black heritage.

The landmark study by Grow and Shapiro (1974) on transracial adoption represents an excellent example of how outcomes from questions on racial identity become tangential to research questions regarding well-being and adjustment within the same study. In this study, only 32% of the adoptees had positive attitudes toward their black heritage. Yet in this and subsequent adoption research this study's findings are cited as exclusively supporting transracial adoption's success (see Simon, 1996). The fact that 77% of the sample was deemed successful in measures of school achievement and adjustment overrode the fact that their predominantly (82%) biracial sample was generally (68%) unsuccessful in developing positive attitudes toward their black heritage (Grow & Shapiro, 1974).

Another noteworthy outcome consistently reported within earlier transracial adoption studies, but ignored as relevant to racial identity outcomes, notes parental differences in racial socialization of adoptees categorized as biracial or identified as "light skinned" (see Grow & Shapiro, 1974; Shireman & Johnson, 1986; Ladner, 1977; McRoy & Zurcher, 1983). In each of these studies, biracial heritage and/or "light skin" were correlated with higher levels of white racial and cultural socialization,

[3] For an extensive discussion of needed methodological shifts in measurement and design of research on racial and cultural identity development for this population see Miranda, 2002.

parental preferences for the label "biracial," and living in predominantly white communities and neighborhoods. Yet in Vroegh's (1997) follow up to Shireman & Johnson's (1986) investigation and Simon, Alstein, and Melli's (1994) publications from their longitudinal study, these differences in parental socialization and their potential significance in the racial identity reports among biracial adoptees who may disproportionately, if not exclusively, comprise this population were ignored. However, despite these findings and earlier discussions that support an understanding of biraciality as relevant to the racial identity outcomes of transracial adoptees, this field is dominated by research questions and matching measures that with few exceptions ignore this diversity within their studies (see DeBerry, Scarr, & Weinberg, 1996; Grow & Shapiro, 1974; Shireman & Johnson, 1986; Simon, Alstein, & Melli, 1994; Vroegh, 1997).

Recent transracial adoption research also suggests that biracial adoptees can have additional challenges in developing a racial identity. For example, in Simon and Roorda's (2000) phenomenological study, the information reported by biracial adoptees regarding their racial heritage was often vague and replete with themes of incomplete, inconsistent, or inaccurate case records speculating about their biracial heritages and, in some cases, lacking the information entirely. Other studies involving biracial adoptees support this finding. It is not unusual within these adult interviews for the biracial adoptees to respond with, "I'm not sure," when asked about their racial heritage and refer to stories that surrounded their conception, surrender, and placement as remembered (often inconsistently) by social workers and their adoptive parents (Miranda; 2002; Patton, 2000; Simon & Roorda, 2000). Often these records and stories also include tales of conflicts in their white (and typically maternal) biological families surrounding the conception/birth of a biracial child as the primary reason for placement (Folaron & Hess, 1993; Miranda, 2002; Patton, 2000; Simon & Roorda, 2000). As one biracial female reports, "I was three weeks old when I was adopted. From what I know my mother's parents didn't want her to have this interracial kid and so they made her put it up for adoption." (Patton. 2000, p. 47). Other adoptees reported the knowledge of white biological siblings who remained with their birth families (Patton, 2000). The unique, "Where do I come from?" dimension tied to any adoptee's identity development process may be especially salient in the development of racial and cultural identities for biracial adoptees who report daily interactions into adulthood that are initiated by polite interrogations and persistent questions regarding the details of their racial origins (Miranda, 2002; Patton, 2000). Likewise, developing a positive understanding of one's black heritage may be challenged not only by its construction in U.S. society (Favor, 1999), but by the knowledge that it was what occasioned one's placement for adoption. These realities may make the development of a racial identity a particularly salient dimension of their experiences as transracial adoptees and may distinguish this population as unique from other adoptees of color who are not noted in research as being relinquished by their birth families due to intrafamilial racism.

Despite these recent findings, much remains unknown about how biracial adoptees actually construct racialized identities and cultural affiliations. What seems clear is that biracial children have been, and will most likely continue to be, a significant population in the world of transracial adoption; a world that continues to attract the attention of researchers, politicians, and the general public (Kelley, 1999, Patton, 2000; Miranda, 2003).

Reframing Research Questions to Examine Biraciality and Transracial Adoption

There are a number of paths for future research seeking to advance theory and practice in this field. Arguably a necessary approach is to begin by simply acknowledging, when known, the race of birth parents (the adoptees' biological heritage) outside of a monocentric framework and using a categorization system for race that allows for the reporting of more than one racial or cultural heritage in collecting data. This would also afford the researcher an ability to explore within group comparisons and assess variations in racial reporting between adoptees who share the same biological biracial heritage, and establish any patterns in how adoptees language their racial identity across the life course. The multiracial movement makes clear there are also multiple labels used by this population (e.g., biracial, multiracial, interracial, mixed) as strategies to negotiate changing politics attached to their mixed race heritage. Allowing for flexibility in languaging identities could render results that are linguistically grounded in the lived experiences of this population, and begin to challenge theory and practice that ascribe a mental health status to the use of specific labels without understanding their meaning or function in a given context.

Consequently, it is time to move away from the use of racial labels as proxy variables for one's cultural *and* racial identity. Past transracial adoption research has fluctuated in the meaning it attaches to reports of "biracial" — ranging from assuming it is synonymous with cultural whiteness (see McRoy & Zurcher, 1983), to considering it a variation of a black identity (see Simon, 1996), or excluding it as a legitimate identity all together (see DeBerry et al., 1996). Current research involving multiracial persons indicates that the racial labels used by both adoptees and non-adoptees can represent multiple cultural experiences, attitudes, and identities (Miranda, 2002; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002). This suggests that an invaluable set of research questions to pursue would simply involve exploring phenomenological inquiries that probe the actual use *and* meaning of racial labels among this population. What is the meaning of race and a racialized identity for biracial adoptees? What range of labels do they use, and what are the cultural experiences and identifications attached to these labels? Pursuing insight into the independence and interdependence of racial labels with one's biological and adoptive background could produce findings that begin to explore how biracial adoptees navigate a racialized identity in the context of transracial adoption, and if their use of racial labels is unique from other multiracial

populations or other transracial adoptees. Gaining an understanding of how the use of racialized language is guided by the cultural and political meanings attached to it would suggest that parents, practitioners, and researchers should be knowledgeable about the assessments of "healthy" and "positive" attributed to the use of socially prescribed labels. It also calls into question the common belief in current transracial adoption research that a biracial adoptee's use of the label "black" is proof that s/he thinks positively about blackness or has any ongoing access or connection to matching experiences with other persons and communities who also racially and culturally identify as black/African American (Miranda, 2002).

Another valuable path for transracial adoption research involving this population is to explore identity development as a multidimensional *process*, which compliments the move away from decontextualized racial label outcomes. One of the criticisms of transracial adoption is its long-term potential for cultural genocide, and concerns that transracial adoptees will be disconnected from their communities of origin. Yet biracial adoptees, who reflect a range of racialized phenotypes, may come to think of their biological race as something fully independent from their cultural or racial identity. For example, it is quite probable that the process of developing an identity for a fair complexioned blonde-haired, blue eyed biracial adoptee could differ from an adoptee whose phenotypes more closely resemble those of his/her black parent. Contemporary research involving transracially adopted biracial adults also reports that one's assumed racial appearances can facilitate identifications with communities beyond one's biological heritage — communities, however, whose members "looked like" the adoptee (Miranda, 2002). This suggests the value of asking research questions to explore the specific racial socialization experiences of adoptees as mediated by the interpretation of their racialized phenotypes in various contexts, and the relevance of these experiences in both their racial and cultural identity choices.

Third, transracial adoption research consistently reports that parental racial socialization is significant in either constraining or expanding the cultural environment of adoptees in their white adoptive families, and some studies have identified specific strategies tied to lighter skin tone or biracial heritage (DeBerry et al., 1996; McRoy & Zurcher, 1983; Miranda, 2002; Simon, 1996). How specific choices in where families live, how or if families shift their own cultural identities to accommodate the birth cultures of adopted members, and the significance they attribute to race for biracial adoptees are necessary "next steps" for this field of research. Arguably, biracial adoptees need to not only be prepared with coping skills for racism, but also skills to navigate the politics of race in both white and black communities regarding their biraciality *and* their transracial adoptive status. It would also encourage the exploration of how transracial adoptive families actually do socialize their adoptees and the "success" of these strategies when used by adoptees at various developmental moments outside of, and within, the adoptive family context. Examining the factors that influence this process (e.g., level of racial

sophistication of adoptive parents), and particularly the interaction between familial variables and adoptee characteristics (e.g., gender, age, racial appearance), could be invaluable in providing information about the range of skills and insights adoptive parents need to foster culturally relevant competencies in their children who will be expected to negotiate a race-conscious, monocentric world.

Finally, there is disturbing evidence that the background information recorded for this population is in general quite inadequate. Clearly, there are understandable circumstances that occasion missing background information about a birth parent, for example, in the case of rape. However, there is evidence that suggests reluctance on the part of case-workers to deliberately asking about racial heritage, inadequate skill and knowledge for working with multiracial children and their birth or foster families prior to adoption and inconsistencies in recording biological heritage all may be even greater causes of missing information (Folaron & Hess, 1993; Miranda, 2002; Patton, 2000). Consequently, because multiracial research overwhelmingly reports the significance of asking the racial origins of persons who appear racially ambiguous, it is important that adoption research begins to explore the additional salience of these experiences for an adoptees' identity development when s/he is left to guess or be assigned an identity by others. What significance do adoptees ascribe to their un/known racial and cultural origins? How does missing information affect the value or meaning adoptees attach to their own phenotypes in forming identities or in facilitating their exclusive or partial identification with the adoptive family's culture? How do biracial adoptees negotiate/reject/internalize the societal meanings attached to a specific racialized identity given the type and quality of information to which they have access regarding their families of origin? In part, answers to these questions could make a case for taking seriously the collection of background information on all children who enter non-relative foster care, either private or public, and provide insight into whether or not having this information supports a more positive or less complicated identity development process. Quite possibly, it could allow adoptees to make real choices into adulthood about the personal importance they attach to their own racial and cultural heritages beyond their socialization experiences in their adoptive family systems.

Conclusions

Specifically exploring identity development among this population is not inherently important because there is something innately problematic about family systems created through transracial adoption or any psychological trauma that is caused by one's multiracial heritage. It is important, however, when one considers the ongoing politics of biraciality and the enduring public opinions regarding biracial persons and their family systems — particularly those constructed through transracial adoption. Recognizing multiple heritages (biological and adoptive) and the realities of negotiating shifting politics that both idealize and pathologize one's familial and

racialized existence presents opportunities for reframing research questions and reconceptualizing identity theories to consider these various developmental and contextual factors. It is also important to explore this issue given the structural realities of adoption policy and practice, adoptive parents' perceptions of biraciality, and the choices they make in racially socializing their biracial children beyond the selection of racial labels.

Adult adoptees are beginning to name and describe their own experiences growing up in families created through transracial adoption. Overwhelmingly, the message and wisdom shared among this group neither embraces colorblindness nor advocates the wholesale eradication of transracial adoption (John, 2002: Kelley, 1999; Patton, 2000; Simon & Roorda, 2000). It is recommended that researchers deliberately pursue and privilege these emic perspectives in reshaping the transracial adoption research agenda. This includes the consideration of context-driven factors that both challenge and provide opportunities for the construction of an inimitable set of strengths and coping skills that may be fully tied to the dual status of being both biracial and transracially adopted. Ultimately, it is a call for future research to abandon the enduring research question, "Is transracial adoption good or bad?" It is hoped that such timely and necessary intellectual pursuits will be best positioned to render findings with an enhanced utility value for all transracial adoptees, whose identity development and well-being will begin in the context of their white adoptive family systems.

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