

Promoting Adoptees' Well-Being in Transracial Adoptive Families

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"As I have grown older, I appreciate being different, but I still struggle with my cultural identity. It is a strange perception since, despite how I look, I am completely American though others don't see me that way."

(in McGinnis, Smith, Ryan, & Howard, 2009, p. 41)

"Parents who adopt transracially need to plan how they're going to raise their children... A transracial child needs someone who can see what he or she sees, someone the child can identify with ...Regardless of what color the foster or adoptive parents are, if they're committed to being good parents, they must pursue and maintain cultural bonds for their child."

(in Simon & Roorda, 2000, p.359)

All parents face the goal of helping their child develop a healthy identity, which is essential for successful functioning throughout life. We all form identities—a sense of self—given our various characteristics. In this article, we focus on adoptive status and cultural characteristics, which can include race/ethnicity, gender, sexual/romantic orientation, religion, etc. Adoptive parents also have the task of supporting an adoptive identity—a sense of self as an adopted person, in one's family and community (Grotevant, 1997).

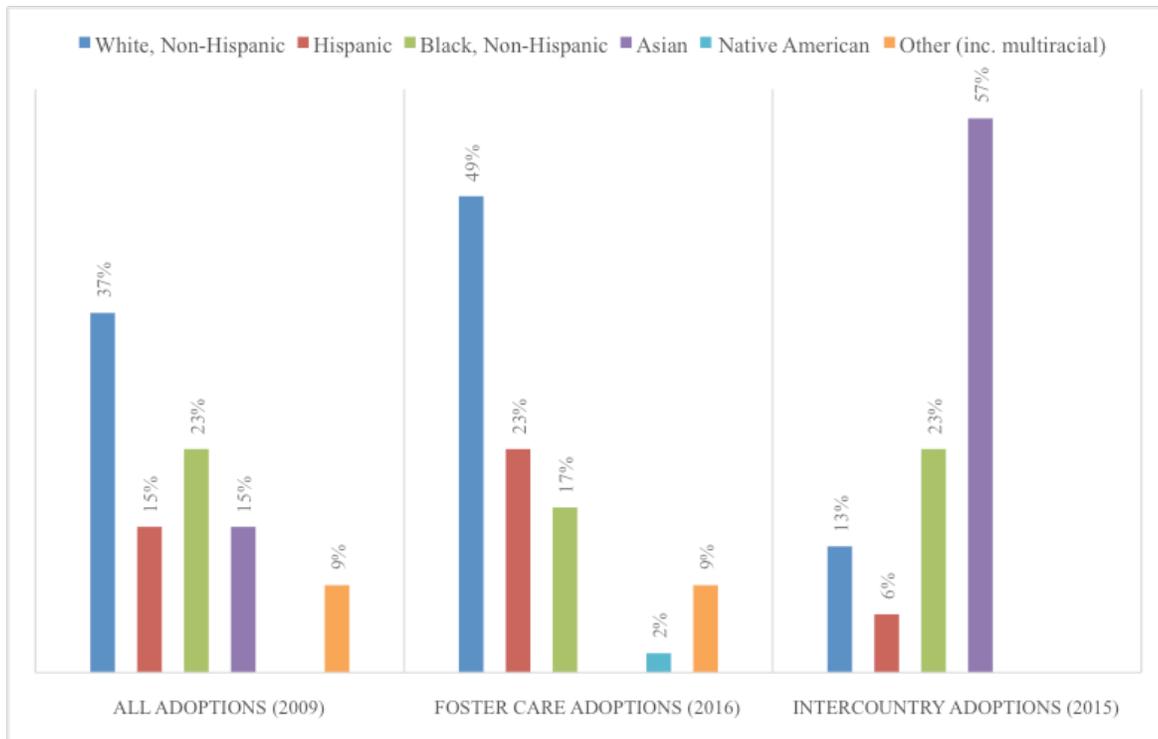
Transracially adopted persons (TRAs) typically are persons of color—of African, Asian, Hispanic, and/or Native American descent—who are adopted into White families. TRAs face what Richard Lee (2003) calls the "transracial adoption paradox". Growing up in these families, TRAs often receive the benefits and privileges experienced by Whites, but yet, when out in the world, face the stigma and injustice that persons of color and other marginalized persons face (Lee, 2003). TRA parents face additional challenges supporting identity development when they don't share their child's cultural background.

After a brief overview of adoption today, this paper discusses critical tasks facing TRA parents, what we know about parents' role and children's outcomes. The paper concludes with suggestions for what parents can do to better meet the task of supporting healthy identity development.

Adoption in today's world has different forms (i.e., private domestic, public from foster care, intercountry). Figure 1 shows statistics from the last national survey of all types of adoptions (Vandivere, Malm, & Radel, 2009), along with recent statistics about foster care adoptions and transnational/intercountry adoptions (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, & Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 2017; US State Dept, 2016). (There are no reliable statistics on private domestic adoptions.) Over 50% of adoptees are persons of color, whereas adoptive parents are predominantly White—71% of private placements, 63% of public placements from foster care, and 92% of intercountry adoptions (Vandivere et. al., 2009). Given the large numbers of transracial placements, many adoptive parents face these tasks.

Critical tasks facing TRA parents include adoption socialization and ethnic-racial socialization. Adoption socialization is a process of introducing adoption information and experiences in the context of forming and maintaining relationships, through conversations, responding to the adoptees' curiosity about their background and managing contact with birth families (for more, see Pinderhughes & Brodzinsky, in press).

Figure 1. Adoption Statistics in the United States.



Sources:

All adoptions: Vandivere et al., 2009

Foster care adoptions: U.S.D.H.H.S., 2017

Intercountry adoptions: U.S. State Dept., 2016

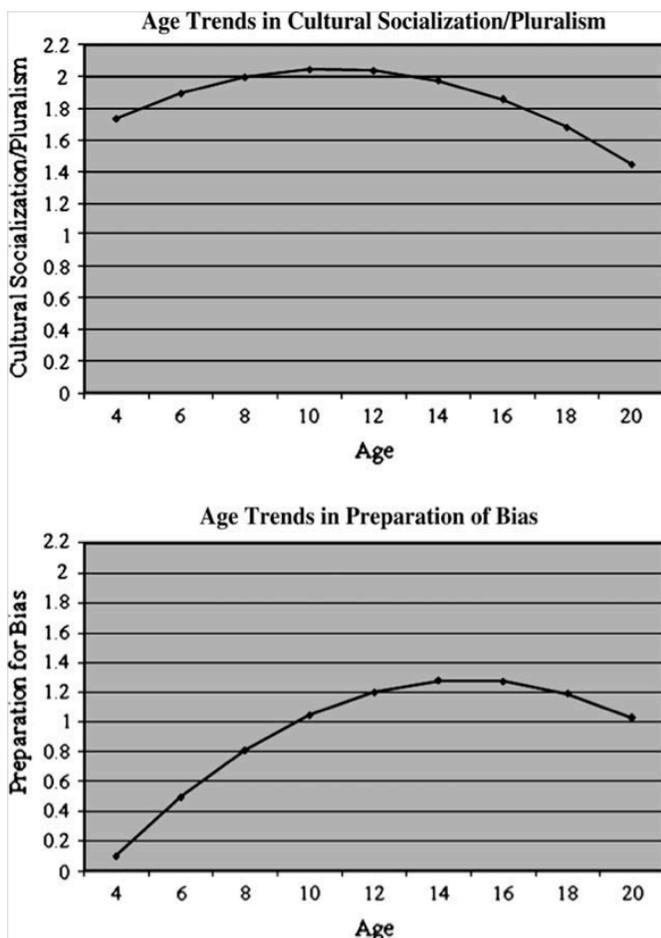
Ethnic-racial socialization is the process by which parents help children develop a sense of themselves, given their racial/ethnic identity (Hughes et al., 2006). Here, we focus on cultural socialization (CS) and preparation-for-bias (Pfb). CS includes activities that expose adoptees to their birth culture and support connection to their cultural group. Activities include ethnic food, books, films, clothes to language lessons, culture camp, a cultural mentor, etc. Depending on how often and who participates, CS can vary in depth of exposure; more frequent activities involving the whole family and/or a cultural mentor offer deeper exposure (Zhang & Pinderhughes, in press). Pfb, on the other hand, features parents' efforts to prepare their children to be aware of and deal with bias. TRAs can face bias or microaggressions—daily insults that convey messages that one is inferior (Sue et al., 2007) regarding their adoptive status (Baden, 2015) or their cultural characteristics (Sue et al., 2007). Typically, TRAs face adoption and racial microaggressions.

Across childhood and adolescence, CS and Pfb have different patterns in adoptive families (Johnston, Swim, Saltsman, Deater-Deckard, & Petrill, 2007). Figure 2 shows the patterns that Johnston and colleagues found in a sample of 474 Asian adoptees ages 3.9 to 20 years. Importantly, although mean levels were low, generally parents provided CS earlier and more often across childhood and adolescence than Pfb.

Studies on parents' role show that parents' beliefs and attitudes are linked to providing CS and Pfb. It is important to note that these are correlational studies and they don't show that parents' attitudes and beliefs cause their behaviors. Let's consider CS first.

When parents acknowledge cultural or racial/ethnic differences, value providing exposure to adoptees' culture-of-origin, or describe their family as multicultural, they are more likely to provide CS (Berbery & O'Brien, 2011; Lee, Grotevant,

Figure 2. Age Trends in Mean Levels of Cultural Socialization and Preparation-for-Bias as Reported by Parents Using a 7 Point Scale*



* Response options were: 0 ("never"), 1 ("not this year"), 2 ("one or two times this year"), 3 ("several times this year"), 4 ("about once a month"), 5 ("several times a month"), 6 ("about once a week"), and 7 ("several times a week")

Source: Johnston, Swim, Saltsman, Deater-Deckard, & Petrill (2007)

Hellerstedt, Gunnar, & Minnesota International Adoption Project Team, 2006; Pinderhughes, Zhang, & Agerbak, 2015). Parents vary in their approaches to providing CS: they initiate, propose or wait (Bebiroglu & Pinderhughes, 2012; Goldberg, Sweeney, Black, & Moyer, 2016; Tessler, Gamache, & Liu, 1999). Parents typically initiate an activity, with little or no consulting the adoptee, when children are very young. Parents who propose activities to the child, offer a choice and parents who wait respond after a child's request

for CS. Finally, sometimes parents avoid or choose not to provide CS (Goldberg et al., 2016). Sometimes these parents identify other priorities, like the adoptee's special needs, insufficient time, etc.

Parents tend to provide PFB when they acknowledge racial/ethnic differences, see differences through the adoptee's perspective, or believe in preparing children to deal with stigma (Berbery and O'Brien, 2011; Crolley-Simic and Vonk, 2011; R. M. Lee et al., 2006). Providing PFB can be especially challenging as it requires that parents address others' negative messages or assumptions about TRAs' adoptive status or racial/ethnic group (Baden, 2016; Farr, Crain, Oakley, Cashen, & Garber, 2016; Garber & Grotevant, 2015). Parents can plan PFB discussions to prepare adoptees for bias situations. Parents also face "teachable-moment" opportunities to provide PFB in which they must choose how to respond. These situations happen in the community when the adoption is publicly visible to others (Wegar, 2000), who make comments or ask questions. Or, children share stories of being bullied about their adoptive status or race/ethnicity, or insensitive teachers (Docan-Morgan, 2011; Tuan & Shiao, 2011; Vashchenko, D'Aleo, & Pinderhughes, 2012). Faced with these often-unexpected situations, parents have to navigate a conversation which can be emotionally charged. Whether parents respond and what they say models for children about dealing with these delicate situations and with bias.

When parents respond to bias situations, they might take different approaches. Sometimes parents actively avoid talking about differences (Goar, Davis, & Manago, 2016; Tuan & Shiao, 2011). One adoptee recalled, "The issue of race was not allowed to be discussed at home. We weren't allowed to talk about our differences." (Docan-Morgan, 2011, page 346). Sometimes parents cannot imagine that others might be unfair to their children because of their race or adoptive status. In these situations, parents might respond with messages that invalidate the adoptee: "a lot of times I think they didn't really believe me. I'd tell them something and they'd be like, 'No, you must have done something to them.'" (Tuan & Shiao, 2011,

p. 49). Other times parents may actively validate the adoptee and support them in dealing with their experiences. For example, one parent reflected,

“I realized that as a white woman I would not always recognize racism... and I know how that feels as a woman, when ... a man would say well you’re imagining it or you’re being too sensitive. And so early on I decided that I would trust her whatever she told me.”

(Zhang, 2018).

When parents provide Pfb, they face managing their own role as a parent. Parents can serve as protectors and educators (Suter, Reyes, & Ballard, 2011). In the protector role, sometimes parents serve as a shield, helping the adoptee and family to guard their identity or modeling how to challenge invasive comments. One parent shared: “When they ask it racially, my wall goes up, and ... I’ll...just come out straight and confront ‘em.” (Suter, 2011, p. 250). Some parents see their role as a tough-love protector - to “toughen up” their child: “You can only protect so much...it’s a tough world and she’s gonna have to live in it...she’s got to toughen up a bit... I don’t know any other way.” (Suter, et al, 2011, p. 253). Sometimes parents adopt an educator role, actively helping the adoptee to anticipate questions, choose whether to answer and practice responses. Importantly sometimes parents find time to debrief after such episodes, helping adoptees process their experiences and to support their identity: “After being out and about...we always have a debrief. We talk...it gives him a chance to find the words to express how he felt when it happened.” (Suter et al., 2011, p 250).

Turning to children’s adjustment, adoptees receiving more CS tend to have positive self-esteem, feel connected to their culture and have fewer behavior problems (Huh & Reid, 2000; Johnston et al., 2007; Manzi, Ferrari, Rosnati, & Benet-Martinez, 2014; Pinderhughes et al., 2015; Yoon, 2004). Adoptees receiving Pfb have higher self-esteem and less depression (Mohanty, 2010), and when

faced with lots of stigma feel less stressed (Leslie, Smith, Hrapczynski, & Riley, 2013).

To summarize, parents’ attitudes and beliefs about culture, race/ethnicity and difference, their comfort level in talking about these issues, as well as what and how they approach CS and Pfb can matter for adoptees. Given the importance of parents’ role, let’s consider what parents can do to support their adoptees. At this point, readers should note that some adoptive parents face additional challenges that they must navigate alongside cultural differences. Inter-country TRA parents also face possible language differences (depending on the adoptee’s age at placement), and, along with parents adopting from foster care, often face the challenges of supporting a child with special needs. Sometimes parents may prioritize these other challenges.

Create a Foundation

Focus on self. First, parents should reflect on themselves as cultural beings. Learning to be clear about how we feel about cultural and racial/ethnic differences, becoming comfortable talking about these differences is essential. Because this work is emotionally difficult, starting early (e.g., before adoption) and doing it throughout one’s life can help parents better support their adoptees. We can access resources to prompt our self-reflection; for sample questions and available resources, see Pinderhughes, Matthews, & Zhang (2016).

Second, parents should focus on the adoptee. Clear and open communication, with developmentally appropriate language about adoption, TRAs’ history and birth family can help support adoptive identity development (Brodzinsky, 2011). Having planned activities/discussions and being able to use teachable moments to provide CS and Pfb can address adoptee curiosity, concerns or distress, thus supporting identity development. Advocating with others on behalf of adoptees can impact their communities and help them feel understood in their family (Tuan & Shiao, 2011). Outside resources are critical: a good mentor who shares the adoptee’s background can model navigating bias; adoption competent therapists can understand the nuances

of adoption, cultural difference, and interpersonal dynamics, thus providing more effective support.

Third, parents should focus on the family. Family-level communication about adoption and differences is important, as is just spending time together (Brodzinsky, 2011; Chin Ponte, 2018; Rueter & Koerner, 2008). TRA families also have other characteristics and identities; promoting a family identity embraces all members and their different identities helps all feel a shared connection.

Adoption professionals must also do the personal work to enable them to provide effective support for families. As the expert, professionals need to have the expertise and comfort level to talk with parents about CS and Pfb. Before placement, professionals can initiate the self-reflection work parents need to do. After placement and throughout TRAs' development, professionals need to be ready to help parents support their children's identity needs. Consultation with teachers and health professionals can educate them so that they can provide services that affirm and empower adoptees.

Conclusion

Cultural socialization and preparation-for-bias are important for the development of healthy identities among transracial adoptees. Parents' attitudes and values about and approaches to providing cultural socialization and preparation-for-bias matter. These processes are important throughout adoptees' development. Parents should provide a foundation with active self-reflection and open family communication in order to be able to effectively provide activities and discussions that will support their children's identity development.

Implications for the Future of Adoption: Research

- We know little about how transracial adoptive parents change over time—studies of how parents' attitudes about and comfort level with talking about cultural and racial differences evolve as they face the tasks of cultural socialization and prepara-

tion-for-bias could help adoption professionals better prepare prospective adoptive parents.

- Transracial adoptees are not a monolithic group—they may face different kinds of bias linked to their race/ethnicity; research is needed to understand how the tasks of supporting transracial adoptees who are of African, Latinx, or Asian descent are similar or different.
- Many adoptive families live in communities where their only resources may be available on-line; how effective are on-line resources in supporting transracially adoptive families who lack access to in-person supports?

Implications for the Future of Adoption: Practice

- Preplacement assessment of prospective adoptive parents should include their comfort level with and ability to talk about cultural and racial differences.
- Preplacement training should prepare parents for the triple tasks of providing adoption socialization, cultural socialization and preparation-for-bias.
- Postplacement supports that include training for and facilitation of parent-child preparation-for-bias discussions and related advocacy with others should be available for adoptive families in-person and virtually.

Implications for the Future of Adoption: Policy

- Licensure requirements for adoption professionals should include demonstrating cultural sensitivity in their own self-reflection, as well as their pre- and post-placement support for adoptive families.
- Mental health professionals who work with adoptive families should meet criteria for adoption competence and cultural sensitivity.
- Adoption legalization processes should incorporate discussion about the importance of parents' role in supporting their adopted child's ethnic and racial identity.

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