

TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHILDREN: TOWARDS CONTINUING  
SEGREGATION, A MOSAIC, OR A GENOCIDAL MELTING POT?

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An abbreviated version was published as Cooperstein, M.A. (1998, May). Transracial Adoption: Segregation, Mosaic or Melting Pot? *Pennsylvania Psychologist Quarterly*, 58(5), 20-21, distributed only to PPA members.

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Running Head: Transracial Adoption

Abstract

This article focuses on the controversy over the transracial adoption (TRA) of African-American children by Caucasian parents. Arguments favoring and opposing TRA are presented, with accusations among researchers including bias, methodological problems, paradigmatic issues, and "cultural genocide." Conceptual confusion over the meanings associated with terms such as transracial, interracial, transcultural, or biracial adoption contribute to the quandary. The roles of mental health and racial identity are explored and forensic and treatment considerations are presented. Although the TRA process appears to result in general adjustment and positive personal self-esteem, developmental aspects and the significance of racial identity with respect to group-esteem appear to be significant, yet overlooked aspects of TRA research. It is suggested that TRA among African-Americans may be unique in its complexity based upon longstanding racial attitudes. Interdisciplinary and multiracial cooperative research is suggested as a means of more accurately approaching the investigation of TRA.

Segregation now, segregation tomorrow and segregation forever!  
George C. Wallace (1995/1963).

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.  
Martin Luther King Jr. (1995/1963).

We become not a melting pot but a beautiful mosaic. Different people, different beliefs, different yearnings, different hopes, different dreams.  
Jimmy Carter (1995/1976).

I hear that melting-pot stuff a lot, and all I can say is that we haven't melted.  
Jesse Jackson (1995/1969).

Given [many] telling personal experiences, it is clear why many believe transracial adoption leads to cultural genocide. It is evident that [transracially adopted] children dislike their appearance, have stereotypical images of blacks, believe that they are better than blacks, and will do anything to change their appearance so as not to be associated with blacks. The formation of human identity is as important as ethnic identity. When a black, Indian, Asian, Latino or Chicano child views themselves as white, there clearly is a problem. These are not well-adjusted children with regard to the questions of identity.  
Felicia Law (1993)

For one year I have been counseling (for unrelated issues) a Caucasian couple who became foster parents to a 9-day old, African-American child. Over the months I observed the emergence of a loving bond between parents and child that transcended race, a healthy developmental growth in the child, and a sense of new life in the middle-aged adults. Recently, however, they learned that they would have to surrender the child to a childless, same-race couple were related to the biological mother, a cocaine addict.

The grief of the foster parents and enormous emotional impact of the experience sensitized me to issues associated with Transracial Adoption (TRA), raising the possibility that I could be called upon to testify on such issues. This article, focusing largely upon African-American TRA, shares some of the information I have gathered and views I have developed on this poignant, important and controversial societal challenge.

### Adoption Statistics

Transracial children are those placed with a foster or adoptive family of another race.

Placements are made either by a public or private agency, or may be independent. The term, however, most often applies to the adoption of a child through the public child welfare system.

The National Adoption Information Clearinghouse (NAIC) informs us that, during the 1990s, there were approximately 120,000 adoptions each year. This number has remained relatively constant since the early 1980s. Of 127,441 children adopted in 1992, 15.5% were public agency adoptions of children in the foster care system and 5% were intercountry or international adoptions of foreign-born children.

Between 2% to 4% of all of all American families children have an adopted child living with them. In 1996, 4% of all children in foster care were under 1 year of age; 56% were from 1-10 years, and 39% were from 11-16 years. By gender, 51% were male, 49% were female.

Considering race and ethnicity, 38% were Caucasian, 45% were African-American, 14% were Hispanic, 1% were Asian/Pacific Islander, and 2% were Native American.

In their length of stay in foster care, the majority remained either between 1-11 months or 3-4 years. Reasons for discharge included reunification with family (63%), adoption (12%), moving in with relatives (9%), emancipation (6%), runaways (4%), guardianship (3%), and transfer (3%).

Although 81% of the families received a subsidy, 19% do not.

### Transracial Adoption: The Controversy

During the 1970s, controversy arose over the adoption of African-American children by Caucasian parents. Arguments favoring TRA were based largely on the assumptions that African-American communities were unable to provide needed same-race adoptive parents and that raising African-American children in a Caucasian home was a better environment than an institution or foster home. In 1972, the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) expressed concern over the large numbers of African-American children being placed with Caucasian families and criticized TRA, citing psychological maladjustment, poor racial identity, the inability to cope with racism and discrimination, and "cultural genocide" as the likely outcomes (see Chestang, 1972; Jones & Else, 1979). Since that time, researchers and professionals in the fields of social work and child development have conducted studies attempting to assess the validity of these assertions.

Doubts were raised over whether TRA fulfilled children's needs. It was proposed that TRA could, in fact, harm the African-American child in that s/he could lose a sense of racial/cultural identity and become unable to relate to other African-Americans. No African-American consensus existed at that time on the question of African-American adoptions by Caucasians. With limited data on same-race adoption rates, it was suggested that the benefits of adopting a African-American child at a younger age by Caucasian parents did not necessarily outweigh the disadvantages of later adoptive failures. Until empirical studies were available assessing the adult personalities of Caucasian-raised African-Americans, placements should not proceed under the assumption that TRA was beneficial (Chimezie, 1975).

The Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA), signed into law by President Clinton in October, 1994, provided further impetus to the TRA placement and adoption movement. This legislation was designed to prevent discrimination in child placement on the basis of race, color, or national origin, to facilitate the recruitment of foster and adoptive parents, and increase the number of adoptions.

#### Transracial Adoption Research

Howard, Royse, and Skerl (1977) surveyed 150 African-American households to examine attitudes and beliefs about TRAs. The majority surveyed did not oppose TRA stating that it was more important that an African-American child receive love from Caucasian parents than placement in foster care or an institution. While respondents expressed concern about a possible loss of identification with the African-American community, meeting the personal needs of the children was considered of primary importance.

Later, McRoy, Zurcher, Landerdale, and Anderson (1982) evaluated self-esteem and racial identity in transracial and inracial adoptees to evaluate whether self-esteem in transracially adopted African-American children differed from those placed with African-American adoptive families. They reported no difference between children in overall self-esteem, although a difference in perception of racial identity was detected.

McRoy, Zurcher, Lauderdale, and Anderson (1984) examined familial and contextual factors influencing the development of racial self-perceptions among 30 African-American or mixed-race children and adolescents adopted by Caucasian parents. They identified 3 ways in which families dealt with racial identity:

- a. 18 families rarely discussed racial issues or associated with African-Americans.

These children perceived themselves as unlike other African-Americans in terms of

attitudes and culture and had strong feelings of "differentness" and held negative attitudes toward other African-Americans.

- b. Six families acknowledged the child's racial identity and provided African-American role models and lived in integrated neighborhoods. The children expressed interest in contact with other African-Americans and discussed racial identity issues with parents and peers.
- c. In a third group of 6, parents adopted several African-American children. These were then identified as interracial families. African-American heritage was emphasized and a psychological support network for the adopted children was provided.

These findings indicate that TRAs require special efforts on the part of parents and children and postplacement agencies.

In a longitudinal study of African-American adoptions, single parents, Caucasian couples, and African-American couples who adopted African-American infants and toddlers were interviewed when the children reached 8 years of age. Approximately 22% had difficulty in adjusting, this percentage being similar to non-TRA adoption follow-up studies. Researchers found that TRA children maintained a good sense of racial identity, but this was not as enhanced as in children adopted by same-race couples. Approximately 60% of the children seemed to have an accurate and positive perception of adoption (Shireman & Johnson, 1986).

Adjustment and identity development in transracial and intraracial adoptions was studied by Johnson, Shireman, and Watson (1987). All children were adopted at less than 3 years of age and most under 1 year. Approximately 75% of the transracially adopted children adjusted well, enjoyed close relationships with their families and friends, and were relatively free of symptoms of emotional distress; this was also true for 80% of the in-racial adoptees. Consistent with Shireman and Johnson (1986) study, however, indicators of racial preference and identity

demonstrated that in-racial children's sense of African-American character exceeded that of transracial children by the time they reached 8 years of age.

In their 20 year longitudinal study, Simon and Alstein (1996) assessed the racial identities and attitudes of TRA children, their biological siblings, and the extent to which the family members were committed to each other. Over 200 families and almost 400 children were interviewed. Findings showed an absence of Caucasian racial preference by the Caucasian and Non-Caucasian adopted children. Children seemed indifferent to the advantages of being Caucasian but were aware of and comfortable with the racial identity imposed on them by their physical appearance. Although a few problems were reported involving truancy, drugs, drinking, and parental divorce, no differences in likelihood of such occurrences were found between adopted and birth children.

In a controversial review of the empirical literature on transracial adoption of African American children, Alexander and Curtis (1996) assessed the impact of Caucasian parenting families upon adoptees' mental health. Although they found no differences in children's level of personal self esteem, apparent differences in racial identity were found, consistent with studies mentioned above. They concluded that (a) TRA was no more likely to be unstable than in-racial adoption and that (b) most studies demonstrated that African- American children adjusted adequately and (c) were not psychologically harmed by placement. The latter conclusion has become a heated issue, with social, psychological and forensic ramifications.

In a lengthier longitudinal study, Vroegh (1997) examined the status of transracial adoptees after 17 years. Adolescents of African-American descent who were adopted in infancy were examined with respect to racial self-identity, general adjustment, and self-esteem. The 34 adolescents adopted into Caucasian families and the 18 adopted into African-American families

identified themselves as African-American or of mixed race in similar proportions. Most were found to be well adjusted and have good or very good self-esteem.

Race and/or Culture? Research Biases, Methodological Flaws, and Conflicting Paradigms

Presenting an interesting view on research into Blacks, Azibo (1988, 1990) offers a structural framework for an *emic* (within cultural) research approach to be applied to African-Americans. He contrasts this theory-derived steady state approach with comparative and cross-cultural types, describing it as part of a paradigmatic revolution in the area of race and identity. He posits that meaningful comparisons for African-American social and psychological functioning are, for the most part, intra-racial and addresses the role of the African-American personality and "Black" identity as distinct, offering this as an Africentric (as opposed to a Eurocentric) frame of reference.

Azibo (1991a) examined own-race preference and own-race maintenance (ORM) among Black undergraduates as defined by his theory and the metatheory of African personality (AFP). Results supported the metatheory's postulate of ORM and Azibo's AFP metatheory, indicating that when race-maintenance relevancy is at issue, the strong AFP subjects manifested ORM behaviors. He posits that this type of pro-African, race-sustaining behavior displayed by strong AFP subjects may be essential to furthering African life.

Specifying the minimum requisites necessary for a metatheory of the African (Black) personality construct, Azibo (1991b) posits that personality has a biogenetic basis and argues that an African personality metatheory must explain the nature of the spiritual essence underlying human personality, the way in which this essence affects the psychological functioning of African people, the interplay between the spiritual, mental, and physical dimensions of the person, and how this affects African psychological functioning.

Ogbonnaya (1994) argues that Azibo's liberation psychology does not name the specific concepts on which this psychology is to be grounded and that it must operate within an African-based conceptualization. Fairchild (1994) also recognizes that Azibo's analysis is incomplete, failing to adequately define key concepts so that the premise is not verifiable.

Despite weaknesses in Azibo's arguments, DeBerry, Scarr, and Weinberg, (1996) assessed ecological competence longitudinally in 88 African-American transracial adoptees, examining relations among measures of family racial socialization, Africentric and Eurocentric reference group orientations, transracial adoption stressors, and the effects on psychological adjustment. Family racial socialization predicted neither Africentric nor Eurocentric reference group orientation in childhood. However, by adolescence family racial socialization predicted Africentric reference group orientation but not Eurocentric reference group orientation. Both Africentric reference group orientation and Eurocentric reference group orientation contributed significantly to adjustment, which declined significantly over the 10 years as transracial adoptees experienced difficulty becoming ecologically competent in both Africentric and Eurocentric reference group orientation. They displayed greater Eurocentric reference group orientation than Africentric reference group orientation.

Similarly, Lovett-Tisdale & Purnell (1996) directed attention towards the societal context of the researcher as well as experimenter and subject biases. They claim that most American researchers have a Eurocentric frame of reference and would not expect to find problems with TRA. Further, they assert that families living in a post-integration society will tend to deny racism or any problems related to the TRA child. They conclude that, with the limited amount of empirical research, not enough evidence exists to support or counteract TRA and no conclusions can be drawn as yet.

Gopaul-McNicol (1996) attacks Alexander and Curtis' (1996) review as statistically flawed and racially biased, stating that suggestions should have been offered for African American researchers to validate their claims and for TRA parents to help in the better adjustment of African-American children. Attitudes about research in the African-American community requires further discussion and Alexander and Curtis' conclusion that there are no harmful effects of TRAs is said to be erroneous at this time.

Harrison (1996) agrees that Alexander and Curtis' conclusion is premature, as certain crucial factors, e.g., the developmental status of the adoptee, has not been examined as an important determining factor for positive outcome of TRA. She believes that the review reflects questionable assumptions and that the lack of empirical evidence of harm may be due to the use of a methodology that does not reflect any harm done. She recommends an exploration of the contexts of families engaging in TRA and the essentiality of centrality of ethnic identity to self identity.

Finally, Turner and Taylor (1996) claim that the failure of African-American opponents of TRA to provide appropriate empirical support has resulted in judicial decisions favoring TRA. They claim that African-American scholars face challenges while conducting research on Caucasian families; these impact upon their ability to receive grants to conduct the type of research relevant to their interest, this despite the availability of appropriate research tools.

Felicia Law (1993) nicely recapitulates the findings: "adoptees...do have a strong identification with their racial group and good levels of self-esteem. However, the fact that 45% stated that they did feel some discomfort over their physical appearance, and 57% have seen a doctor or counselor because of emotional problems, should not be forgotten. Needless to say if a(n) Asian) child considers an operation on their eyes because it sets them apart from their peers,

there is definitely a problem. When a child is told that race does not matter and all they need is a 'human identity,' there is definitely a problem.”

TRA: Investigational Science or Scientism ?

TRA has caused considerable controversy and a tension within the fields of psychological and social research, with accusations ranging from racial bias to “cultural genocide” in the application of scientific methodology to assess the impact of adoption procedures upon children. Enormous complexity surrounds the issues of African-American TRA as it may provoke racist reactions, discrimination and prejudice. Of interest is Kim’s (1995) observation that, in contrast to the controversy over transracial adoption of African American children by Caucasian families in the U.S., international TRA of Asian children has not received as much scientific or social attention, although there has been a steady increase in this group, made up largely of Korean children.

The issues of race and identity in African-American children should not be taken lightly; it may, in fact, be unique among all TRA populations due to the ubiquitous negative associations that have been attached to Black Americans, the vestiges of attitudes of racial superiority. Although idealistically, this should not be an issue in this era, its lingering presence emphasizes the continuing need for social growth and interracial healing.

Supporters and opponents of TRA agree that minority children available for adoption have the right and need to develop a sense of ethnic identity and knowledge of their cultural heritage. The basis of this ideology may lie in the political opposition of Black separatists to the humanistic thrust of the civil rights movement. However, the questionable social and

psychological assumptions used to justify this position remain, disallowing the legitimacy of rearing minority children with values that de-emphasize heritage and ethnicity (Hayes, 1993).

Although studies show that TRA children are capable of developing good personal self-esteem, this may not be enough. Recognizing the positive attributes of TRA, McRoy (1989) correctly emphasizes the unique cultural needs of African-American children and the desirability of within-race adoption. On this subject, Ashton (1997) states:

A point that is not emphasized in studies and articles on transracial parenting is the issue of *self-esteem* as compared to *group-esteem*....The lack of group identity is a major fear among many Blacks concerning transracially adopted children in white families--the siphoning off of Black kids who then identify with whites and will feel no sense of responsibility for dealing with what's happening to Blacks as a group. Supporting positive group identity is a major part of our job as white parents of Black kids. Failure to do that is a legitimate and appropriate concern for Blacks, including those who oppose transracial adoption.

Although researchers, such as Azibo (1988, 1990), refer to an "African personality" and sociopolitical enslavement resulting from the use of a Eurocentric viewpoint, we must grapple with (a) whether any personality construct can signify the social, cultural, and religious divergences that constitute a neighborhood, city, state, country or continent and (b) is it appropriate to apply such a construct to largely American (albeit subcultural) children whose ancestors were brought to these shores 400 years before ?

Confusion continues over the very meanings associated with what is meant by transracial, interracial, transcultural, or biracial adoption as reflected in a multiracial community meeting. Leftwich (1996) reported that the group acknowledged their conceptual confusion. Parents (some being adoptees) viewed TRA as a good and valuable thing. Caucasian parents spoke of seeking integrated neighborhoods in which to live and searching systematically for opportunities to allow their adopted African-American child to interact with other African-American children

and adults, such as visits to African-American churches. Others traveled to foreign countries to expose the child to their country of birth, collecting artifacts to have in the home. All addressed the difficulties adopted children would face beyond the home, agreeing that racism and bigotry would be the primary realities that would shape the adopted child's experiences in the world.

The facilitating placement agencies assume much responsibility for the success or failure of TRAs. Kallgren and Caudill (1993) evaluated 7 agencies in 4 major urban areas, finding that agencies generally did not provide adequate literature on racial awareness, training sessions, or support systems, and did not encourage families to live in integrated neighborhoods.

Brooks, Bussiere, Barth and Patterson (1997) sum up the status of our knowledge of TRA:

No empirical studies either support or refute the value of same race placement, nor do any definitively evaluate the effect of same race placement policies on the length of time a child waits for an adoptive home...Studies of the success of transracial placements have limitations; moreover they indicate only that transracial placements are not harmful to children, not whether a same race placement would have been preferable. There is little information on the role of race in the development of a child's self esteem or ability to adjust, or about how these issues may play out for children who have been adopted. Definitive information on how to assess a child's needs based on race, how to evaluate the needs of children with mixed heritage, how to assess a family's ability to meet the child's needs related to race, and how to provide effective support to families who adopt transracially is also lacking.

Until unbiased, multiracial cooperative efforts are made to research and serve the welfare of African-American and other transracial and transcultural groups of adoptees, we must respect the disagreements proposed by dissenting researchers, at least as hypotheses worthy of testing. Cross-cultural and cross-racial research into TRAs is sorely needed to examine these issues.

### TRA from Forensic and Treatment Perspectives

With the exception of MEPA, adoption law is generally State law. All states have provided statutes governing the process by which a legal parent-child relationship is created between individuals not biologically parent and child. Some states having doctrines of "equitable adoption" allow courts to legally recognize adoptions even when all statutory procedures have not been completed. Consequently, a forensic psychologist who is called in on a TRA case should review MEPA and the adoption laws of one's own State. Parent-child relationships established by adoption may, however, have direct consequences in fields of Federal law.

Griffith & Duby (1991) examined the historical underpinnings of the current TRA dispute. Examining trends following the Supreme Court's declaration that judicial standards must preempt community values in the area of race, they contend that community preferences for same-race families and the biased norms of mental health professionals continue to impact upon opinion in the legal arena. While policymakers invoke the language but, perhaps, not the spirit of mental health in their arguments, mental health practitioners should be aware of the ongoing debate and uncertainty over TRAs. TRA judicial denials may be challenged as violations of the due process rights of Caucasian foster parents wishing to adopt African-American children and a violation of the rights of the children themselves.

One approach to this matter is the use of Bonding Assessments. These are used to determine whether to return a child to a parent from whom s/he was removed, when two or more families claim custody of the child, when opposing psychological, social or legal professionals disagree on which potential caretaker can best meet the child's needs, and when transracial adoptions are considered. The bonding Interview is the primary tool in the assessment and consists of a

semi-structured observational session in which evaluators provides materials and gives the adult-child dyad a series of tasks (Stokes and Strothman, 1996).

For the present, therapists dealing with TRA should

- Become familiar with the research issues and laws.
- Assess appropriate racial, gender, and alternative life-style values of the family, neighborhood, extended family, school and community.
- Encourage cultural diversity in the family/home.
- Help parents avoid token diversity and recommend finding materials and visual representations that accurately reflect children's in-country experiences.
- Recommend avoiding the organization of activities only around holidays or food.
- Avoid tokenism, such as one black doll amidst many white dolls, or only one book about any cultural group.
- Be aware of unfair practices in your agency, practice, or community that affect the lives of your clients.
- Address the lack of ethnic-sensitive toys, literature, and children's books at your treatment facility.
- Seek assistance through

Workshops: e.g., Racism Issues and Multiracial Families, Jim Mahoney, MSW, 1220 South Division, Spokane, WA 99202.

Organizations: e.g., the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW), 1969 Madison Ave., New York, NY 10035 and New York State Citizens' Coalition for Children (NYSCCC), Inc., 306 East State Street, Suite 220, Ithaca, NY 14850.

Reading Materials: Transracial Adoptive Parenting: A Black White Community Issue by Leora Neal and Al Stumph (available through NABSW).

### A Summing up

Since initiating this article, I have inquired into the TRAs to which I have been exposed in my community. Among these are Oriental and African-American children being raised by Caucasian parents. From neighbors I have learned that their Korean adoptees are sent to a “Korean Camp” every summer where they are exposed to the many aspects of Korean culture, exposing them to their cultural heritage. Knowing these children, one of whom is a 14, I have come to recognize that, despite their exposure to Korean culture, they identify most strongly with the middle-class Caucasian culture in which they are being raised.

Perhaps it is the children who will best direct us towards the most appropriate path. Consider the following extract from *My Adoption Story: She Was White, I Was Black* by Lefonché Rawls (New York State Citizens' Coalition for Children, Inc NYS citizens' Coalition for Children, Inc. 306 East State Street, Suite 220, Ithaca, NY 14850, <http://www.nysccc.org/index.html>).

We as foster children don't really have any rights. If our biological parents aren't doing right by us, then we should have the say who we want to be with. I feel it doesn't matter what color your guardian is, so long as they're doing right by you. That's all that matters. Some people feel that Blacks should be with Blacks and Whites should be with Whites. That's not true. Your own kind can mistreat you.

James Baldwin (1995/1955) said “The making of an American begins at the point where he himself rejects all other ties, any other history, and himself adopts the vesture of his adopted land.” The complexity of TRA and the plight of African-American foster and adopted children may lie more in America’s history of racism and the cultural paranoia of Blacks living in America than the proposed paradigmatic contrast between Eurocentrism and Africentrism. A truly integrated, egalitarian society in which the negative traits associated with American Black culture (and others) are neutralized would negate the apparent need for positive reference group esteem. This dissent and the research it generates may be the critical point that marks a

change of course in American social evolution, a watershed that may slowly, but forever change American character.

Baldwin's vision is prophetic but, as a nation we are all not yet ready to divest ourselves of other ties, identities, alliances and invest in his America. As Kierkegaard (1995/1938) comments, "In order to swim one takes off all one's clothes—in order to aspire to the truth one must undress in a far more inward sense, divest oneself of all one's inward clothes, of thoughts, conceptions, selfishness etc. before one is sufficiently naked." It is only when our citizenry stands in this state of nakedness that we may be truly born as a nation, not as a melting pot in which cultural and ethnic heritage is lost in a crucible of assimilation, but as a richly integrated mosaic, a spectrum of races and cultures working together for the welfare of our children.

We Americans have the chance to become someday a nation in which all radical stocks and classes can exist in their own selfhoods, but meet on a basis of respect and equality and live together, socially, economically, and politically. We can become a dynamic equilibrium, a harmony of many different elements, in which the whole will be greater than all its parts and greater than any society the world has seen before. It can still happen.

Shirley Chisholm

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