TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION REVISITED:
AFRICAN AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

African American children are victimized by poverty, discrimination, and even adoption policies which keep them in foster care and in institutions. Transracial adoption, one avenue to alleviate the problem, is burdened with controversy that need to be resolved. This article explores the opinions of African American college students on transracial adoption. It was found that transracial adoption was preferred to foster care or institutionalization, and that children need a permanent home regardless of the adoptive parent's race.

INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that in the United States more than 150,000 children are adopted each year. About 50,000 African American children are available for adoption, and 35,000 of them are boys. In addition, there are about 250,000 African American children in foster care nationwide (Bartholet 1991; Greene, Kulper 1995; Morisey 1990). White parents have adopted Asian and Native American children for the past four decades (Zastrow 1993).

Overall, the average waiting period for adoption is more than 2-1/2 years, and minority children, especially African Americans, wait up to five years (Owen 1994; Rodriquez, Meyer 1990).

About 8 percent of all adoptions are transracial or transethnic, with about 1 percent being adoptions of African American children by white parents (Flango, Flango 1993; Stolley 1993). Although a number of special adoption projects have been initiated to help encourage placement of African American children in same-race placements, African American children are far less likely to be adopted than other children of similar age and behavior (Barth, Courtney, Berry 1994; Barth, Courtney, Needell 1994; Bartholet 1993).

About three decades ago, some white couples began adopting African American children. Their desire to adopt African American children raised a controversy that is still unresolved and which adoption workers face today. In 1972 the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW), issued a statement that denounced transracial adoption in all cases, referring it to an act of "racial and cultural genocide." Rationales posited by NABSW included:

1) the need of young African American children to begin at birth to identify with all African American people in African American community;

2) the necessity of self-determination from birth to death, of all African American people; and,

3) the philosophy that African Americans need their own to build a strong nation. (Davis 1992; Hogan, Siu 1988)

Concern over the impact of transracial adoption on the long-term psychosocial and identity development of African American children has been expressed by African-American authors (Chestang 1972; Chimenzie 1975; Jones 1975). Other observers have questioned the legality and constitutionality of race-conscious policies in the adoption process. They contend that adoption policies have resulted in "melanin management", where white and African American applicants have shown a preference for lighter -skin over darker-skin children (Bartholet 1993). The victims of this adoption practice are the children who are left in foster homes and other institutions. This article extends the previous research on transracial adoption by reporting on the opinions of African American college students regarding transracial adoption.

RESEARCH ON TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION

Substantive research that has compared the psychosocial development of African American children adopted and raised by whites to those raised in same race environment is very scarce. Few studies emerged during the 1970s and 1980s which attempted to determine whether and to what extent the psychosocial development of African American children are detrimentally affected by transracial adoption. Virtually nothing has been written on those topics in the 1990s, but significant gaps in our knowledge about transracial adoption continue to exist. However, Zastrow (1976) compared the satisfactions derived and problems encountered between transracial adoptive

parents and in racial adoptive parents and found that 1) transracial adoptions were as satisfying as inracial adoptions; 2) transracially adopted children were accepted by relatives, friends, neighbors, and the general community; 3) parents of transracially adopted children reported minimal problems; 4) these parents treated transracially adopted children as their own.

In the 1980's, two research studies focused on the preadolescent and adolescent transracially adopted children. Simon & Altstein (1981) and Bartholet (1991) studied transracial adoptions and found that parents were satisfied with the experience. The stresses parents reported were related to having to spend more time in integrating lifestyle differences of the transracial children with their biological children. It was noted that both the children and the parents in transracial families may acquire special interpersonal talents and skills at bridging cultures.

In a study of self-esteem development in transracially adopted adolescents and inracially adopted adolescents, no differences were found in overall self-esteem (McRoy, Zurcher 1983). However, racial identity was found to be a problem for African American adolescents adopted by whites. The authors questioned the ability of such parents to integrate African American culture in their parenting practices. Some researchers have studied adjustment rates of transracially adopted children. Silverman & Feigelman (1981) found that the adjustment rate for both transracial and inracial adopted children were the same, when adjusted for age at adoption. In a follow-up study, it was indicated clearly that "there is a strong association between age at adoption and maladjustment" in both transracial and intraracial children (Silverman, Feigelman 1981).

In England, Bagley studied a group of Afro-Caribbean and mixed race children who were adopted by British whites beginning at age seven (Bagley 1993). A follow-up study was conducted twelve years later when the children were about 19 years of age. Results of a series of tests on the young people concluded that there were no significant adjustment differences between them and those adopted intraracially. The researcher concluded that it may be that children of color and their adoptive families learn different identities from their adoption experience and there is no evidence that the difference is harmful to the people involved. Several other studies on transracial

adoption have concluded that there is no evidence of significant harm to the adopted children, but that emphasis should be placed on culturally sensitive parenting skills (Bagley 1993; Johnson, Shireman, Watson 1987; Simon 1988; Vieni 1975; Vroegh 1992; Zuniga 1991).

A previous study was conducted by Howard, Royse, and Skerl (1977), who assessed the African American community's attitudes regarding transracial adoption almost twenty years ago. That study found that 81 percent of African Americans preferred transracial adoption over keeping a child in a foster home or institution. Another study conducted by Simon (1978) sought to discover the attitudes of "educated middle-class" African Americans toward transracial adoption. Simon found that their opinions were divided, with slightly under half (45%) approving adoption of African American children by white families.

Since a lot of changes have occurred in society since the Howard et al and Simon studies, this research examines the opinions of a younger generation. Values and beliefs regarding transracial adoption may differ from that of African Americans surveyed in the 1970s and 80s. Furthermore, case law is raising new concerns about the legality of placement decisions based primarily on race. In 1991, the US Office for Civil Rights found that criteria for adopting or methods of administration of adoption services that result in the exclusion, limitations, or segregation of ethnic children relative to adoptive placements violate their civil rights (Belloli 1991; Hollinger 1993). The passage of the Howard M. Metzenbaum Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994 prohibits any agency or entity that receives federal assistance

to categorically deny to any person the opportunity to become an adoptive or a foster parent, solely on the race, color, or national origin of the adoptive or foster parent, or the child involved; or delay or deny the placement of a child for adoption or into foster care, or otherwise discriminate in making a placement decision, solely on the race, color, or national origin of the adoptive parent, or the child involved (s.553(a) 1 (A&B). (Barth et al 1994)

This current study follows these recent developments and is a partial replication of Howard et al (1977).

Three items were chosen from the

Howard et al study because they gauge the respondents' attitudes and beliefs toward transracial adoptions. The items were as follows:

ITEM 1 It is better to place black children in foster homes than have them adopted by white families.

ITEM 2 Black children need a permanent home, regardless of the race of adopting parents.

ITEM 3 Parents of black children should make the decision on whether their children are adopted by white or black families.

Four items were chosen because they measured respondents' attitudes about white parents' ability to equip black children to live in an often racist society.

ITEM 4 White parents are not prepared to teach black children to cope with racism.

ITEM 5 Whites cannot understand the problems black children face in society.

ITEM 6 White parents cannot prepare black children for the problems associated with interracial dating.

ITEM 7 White parents can adequately prepare black children for the problems the children will face in school.

Five items were selected which measured respondents perception of how easy or difficult it would be for a black child raised by white adoptive parents to fare in both black and white cultures. The items were:

ITEM 8 Black children can never adjust in a white home.

ITEM 9 Black children adopted by whites are competent to function in black communities.

ITEM 10 Black children adopted by whites will not suffer culturally if provided integration with other blacks.

ITEM 11 Black children do not learn their cultural identity when raised by whites.

ITEM 12 Potential white parents need training in black history to adequately parent black children.

For the purpose of this study, the concept of transracial adoption is defined as the legal process of adopting African American children into white families. It is understood that there is only one human race, therefore the concept

of "race" is used here for identification purposes. Also, although the term African American has recently become more popular than "black," black was used by the original authors in their instrument and for comparison this language was kept in the current study.

METHOD

The subjects in this study were African American university students enrolled at a major state university during the Fall Semester of 1994. The author obtained the list of students from the university's Office of Minority Affairs. The university is located in the southeastern region of the United States, and is predominantly white. A total of 1254 African American students out of approximately 24,000 students were enrolled at the time of the study.

As a first step in the data collection, the list was reviewed and only those students with complete information (name, address and telephone number) were selected. This resulted in a small group of 900 students. From this 900, a sample of 400 was selected by systematic sampling.

Four student volunteers coordinated contact of the participants through telephone calls, black student organizations, and the Martin Luther King Cultural Center at the university. Respondents were asked to give their opinion using a Likert-type Scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Undecided, Disagree, Strongly Disagree), and a total of 368 (92%) completed and usable responses were obtained.

Of the 368 respondents, 215 (58%) were females, and 153 (42%) were males. All respondents were in the 18-39 year-old category. Most of the respondents had origins from the southeastern region of the United States (62%), while the other 38 percent originated from northeast, midwest, and the west. Seventy-four percent of respondents were undergraduate students, and twenty-six percent were graduate students. The self-administered questionnaire instructed participants to respond anonymously. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

FINDINGS

African American college students in this survey overwhelmingly support transracial adoption of African American children by white parents over foster homes or other alternative institutions. For example, 76 percent of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the item statement that it is better to place

Table 1: Opinion Results of African American College Students on Transracial Adoption in Percentages and Numbers (N=368)

Item	Strongly Agree %	Strongly Agree N	Agree %	Agree N	Undecided %	Undecided N	Disagree %	Disagree N	Strongly Disagree %	Strongly Disagree N
1. Better to place black children in foster homes than adopted by whites.	--	--	5	18	19	70	31	114	45	116
2. Black children need a permanent home, regardless of race of adoptive parents.	68	250	14	52	8	29	4	15	6	22
3. Parents of black children should make the decision about adoption.	4	15	55	202	27	99	8	30	6	22
4. White parents are not prepared to teach black children to cope.	7	26	36	133	9	33	33	121	15	55
5. Whites cannot understand the problems of black children.	11	40	32	118	4	15	37	136	16	59
6. White parents cannot prepare black children for interracial dating.	14	15	30	110	12	44	32	118	12	44
7. White parents can adequately prepare black children for problems in school.	12	44	58	213	12	44	10	37	8	30
8. Black children can never adjust.	10	37	9	33	26	96	38	140	17	62
9. Black children adopted by whites are competent in black communities.	7	26	43	158	12	44	31	114	7	26
10. Black children adopted by whites will not suffer culturally.	26	96	49	180	16	59	6	22	3	11
11. Black children do not learn cultural identify.	34	125	25	92	7	26	30	110	4	15
12. White parents need training in black history.	46	169	38	140	4	15	10	37	2	7

black children in foster homes than have them adopted by white families. None strongly agreed, while 5 percent agreed, and 19 percent were undecided (Table 1).

Similarly, 82 percent concurred that black children need permanent homes, regardless of the race of adopting parents. Eight percent were undecided, and 10 percent disagreed.

However, 59 percent of the respondents preferred that black parents decide whether their children could be adopted by either black or white families. Twenty-seven percent were undecided, and 12 percent believed that it was not necessary to consult with the natural parent(s).

This survey also measured respondents perceptions of white adoptive parents sensitivity to the racial problems that black young people face. When asked if white parents are prepared to teach black children to cope with racism, respondents were almost evenly divided. Forty-eight percent expressed the opinion that white parents are not prepared to teach black children how to cope with racism, and 43 percent of the respondents felt that white parents are prepared to help black children cope with racism. Nine percent were undecided.

Another item related to white parent's understanding of problems that black children face in society. Fifty-three percent of respondents indicated that white adoptive parents of black children can understand the problems posed to these children by society. Forty-three percent disagreed and a very few (4%) were undecided.

Opinions were also evenly divided on the item related to interracial dating preparation of black children raised by white families. Forty-four percent of respondents felt that white families cannot prepare black children for interracial dating problems, while another 44 percent had the opinion that white families can indeed prepare their adopted black children. Twelve percent of the respondents were undecided.

Can white adoptive parents adequately prepare black children for the problems they may face in schools? Seventy percent of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that white families who adopt black children indeed can adequately prepare their children for possible problems in school. Only 18 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 12 percent were undecided.

Item eight asked respondents to indicate whether black children can or cannot adjust in white homes. Fifty-five percent of respondents said that black children can adjust in white families, while 19 percent felt that black children will never adjust in white families. About a quarter of all respondents (26%) were undecided.

Are black children raised by white families competent to function in black communities? Half of the college age respondents thought so. Thirty-eight percent indicated otherwise, while 12 percent were undecided.

Will black children adopted by white families suffer culturally? Seventy-five percent, the second largest proportion obtained with any of the items, believed that black children adopted by whites would not suffer culturally as long as their parents allow interaction with other blacks. Only 9 percent of the respondents thought that the children will still suffer culturally, while 16 percent were undecided.

About one-third (34%) of respondents believed that black children do not learn their cultural identity when raised by white families. However, 59 percent believed that they do learn their cultural identity when raised by white families. Seven percent were undecided.

Finally, there was strong consensus that potential white parents of black children need training in black history. Eighty-four percent of respondents strongly agreed or agreed with that statement. Only twelve percent did not concur with that statement, while 4 percent were undecided.

DISCUSSION

Transracial adoption, especially between white parents and African American children, has been dominated by concerns of legality, the child's psychosocial needs, and the problem of these children being denied exposure to their own cultural heritage. In light of the showing that children adopted transracially are as well adjusted as other adopted children, and the recent Howard M. Metzenbaum Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994 states, social workers, and those in the adoption practice ought to re-evaluate their policies preventing transracial adoption. But how do African Americans feel about the possibility increased transracial adoptions?

The findings from this study clearly indicate that the majority of African American college students do not oppose adoption of African American children by white families. A

significant majority appear to be favorable to transracial adoption under certain conditions. The preponderance of respondents believed that the need for a permanent home is more important to a black child's welfare than the race of the adoptive parents. This research found that while the respondents were aware of the child's possible low level of identification with the black community and culture, the needs of the individual child supersede that identification. At the same time, respondents strongly believed that adoptive white parents need a knowledge of black history to raise black children, and that efforts should be made to increase interaction between the child and other blacks.

This study also found that presently over half of the respondents felt that natural parents of black children should be allowed to have some say in the adoption of their children. This finding is interesting because it is consistent with open adoption practice—which is being adopted by many agencies.

There were five questions where 70 percent or more of the respondents agreed. Respondents recognized the value of transracial adoption over forcing black children to remain in foster homes, that black children need a permanent home regardless of race of adoptive parents, and that white parents can adequately prepare black children for problems in school. The need for white adoptive parents of black children to be trained in black culture and history was identified as a means of insuring that those children do not suffer culturally.

Furthermore, respondents divided evenly on issues about whether white parents understand the problems of black children and the ability of those children to competently function in black communities. While the respondents were concerned about the child's possible loss of identification with the black community, sensitivity to the needs of the individual child were overall more important. Implication from study findings is that African Americans are not in favor of the racial matching practice of the adoption process. Therefore, attention should be directed at improving opportunities for all toward the goal of a multicultural society.

Almost everyone would agree that a child's welfare should be the utmost concern in adoption. However, controversy continues to cloud the interest of children when it comes to whites adopting black children in the United States. Those who oppose transracial adoption feel that it is naive to think that whites can provide the coping mechanism needed for a black child to deal with a racially oppressive society. People who are black are encouraged to consider adopting children. The problem is that there are too many children to adopt. Recent direction in adoption practices advocate making it easier to adopt than in the past. It is important to clearly understand that the children are the ones victimized in the transracial adoption controversy. Issues of urgent consideration should address those factors of poverty and racism affecting African Americans in general. Those are the culprits, not any adoptive parent of any race.

LIMITATIONS AND STRENGTHS

One limitation of the study should be discussed which makes generalizations from this data somewhat problematic. The sample was drawn from a single southeastern state university. All the respondents had some college education and about a quarter of them were college graduates. Respondents are likely to be younger and somewhat more liberal in their views about transracial adoption than a cross-section of African American adults. Transracial adoption is an important topic that deserves further investigation with larger and more representative samples. Therefore, it is possible that the findings presented here concerning transracial adoption are unique to it. Perhaps, national samples may be considered for future research. However, one important strength of this research relate to the geographical diversity of respondents. Almost all regions of the country were identified as the geographical origin of respondents. Another strength of the data relate to the minority status of the respondents in a predominately white university. This is important because, that environment may have some influences on their perceptions concerning their families of origin and coping skills needed for individual survival in a predominately white social environment.

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