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Kristen Denise McCully  
The Space Between: Transracial  
Adoptees's Racial Identity and the  
Role Parents Play in Identity  
Development

## ABSTRACT

This study explored how transracial adoptees perceive their racial identity and the role that parents play in identity development. In particular, people who participated in this study were asked to reflect on the messages they received about their racial/ethnic identity and how racism may have played into these messages.

Interviews were conducted with 12 transracial adoptees who were over the age of 18 at the time of the study. Participants were asked questions about the diversity of the neighborhoods in which they grew up; how their parents recognized their race/ethnicity; how their parents contributed to their racial identity development; how racism influenced their development; if they felt their parents had prepared them for racism; and how their racial/ethnic identity fits into how they identify themselves currently.

The findings illustrate that many parents related to this sample seemed to emphasize similarities between themselves and their adopted children more often than acknowledge their differences. It is noteworthy, however, that some of the sample members' parents did offer assistance in the way of food, books, or dolls to help their children learn about their race/ethnicity, none of them chose to live in diverse neighborhoods. Findings also show that the majority of the participants did not feel that their parents prepared them to deal with racism.

Findings from the study further suggest that social workers must support and encourage people who adopt transracially to explore their own identity, as well as that of their prospective adoptive child to become more in tune with differences and their potential implications. Finally, the findings suggest that living in a diverse neighborhood and having frequent contact with people who are of the similar race or ethnicity of the adopted child could aid in the development of a healthy racial identity.

THE SPACE BETWEEN:  
TRANSRACIAL ADOPTEES' RACIAL IDENTITY  
AND THE ROLE PARENTS PLAY IN  
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

A project based upon independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for degree of Master of Social Work.

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2007

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To my amazing future husband, Patrick, thank you for your love, encouragement, understanding, and of course, the chocolate and love gifts that have gotten me through Smith and the thesis. You're my favorite, woo-woo!

*The notion that any one person is the single cause of any significant social change is a devastating stereotype which robs individuals of responsibility and credit, and actually inhibits social change. You can be a revolution of one. In your living room, in your family, and in your community.*

*– Justin Dart*

*Sometimes a scream is better than a thesis.*

*- Ralph Waldo Emerson*

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

*One day I asked my mum, 'When did you tell me I was adopted?' and she replied, 'We didn't have to, you looked in the mirror.' ...I cannot claim to be Vietnamese, despite my appearance. Yes, I was born there, but that's the end of my experience with the country and culture. I cannot claim to be a part of something I know nothing about (Armstrong & Slaytor 2001, p. 33).*

In a recent children's book by John Butler (2001) titled, *Whose Baby Am I*, different cute and cuddly baby animals ask, "Whose baby am I?" and on the successive pages the babies are illustrated next to a larger version of an animal that looks exactly like them. The babies discover they are pandas, giraffes, or bears depending on their physical features. So how would a child who looks nothing like his or her parents interpret this story? If you are a lion and your mom or dad is a zebra or a monkey what does that make you? Does the baby fall into the category of his or her looks or the category that his or her parents identify with? These are the types of questions which fuel the transracial adoption debate.

The purpose of this study was to look deeper into transracial adoption and examine adoptees' perceptions of their racial identity. This study was designed to answer the following question: How do transracial adoptees perceive their racial identity and what role do parents play in identity development? What happens when a child grows up in a family where he or she does not resemble his or her parent(s)? How do transracial adoptees identify? It is certainly much more complicated than in the Butler's children's

book. On surveys, medical records, and job applications we are asked to check what racial category we belong to; the need to define “what” we are is all around us. Society’s desire to categorize and label individuals is particularly troublesome for children and adolescents who are adopted into a family that is physically very different. For many transracial adoptees there is no box to be checked that accurately represents who they are or how they identify. Many transracial adoptees exist “in the space between” these identified categories, marginalized by society’s desire to have everyone neatly labeled.

Complicating this matter is the social construction of the language that we use to categorize one another. Concepts of culture, race, ethnicity, and identity overlap and intertwine and there are not universally agreed upon definitions of any of these terms. It would be irresponsible to attempt to define these words and concepts without emphasizing that they are ever evolving and changing. In the next chapter, I will discuss and explain the particular language choices that are used in this study.

Over the past few decades there has been a great deal of debate regarding transracial adoptions and the effect on the adoptees’ racial identity. In the United States the debate over the appropriateness of placing children outside of their racial category has been fueled in the recent past by the passage of the Multi Ethnic Placement Act (MEPA) in 1994 and the Interethnic Adoption Provisions (IEP) legislation in 1996. Both MEPA and IEP mandate that no federally funded agency may delay or deny the placement of a child on the basis of race, color, or national origin (Alexander & Curtis, 2002). Although this study focused on transracial adoption in the United States, it is important to note that the controversy surrounding transracial adoption is not unique to the United States.



Countries such as the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Australia face similar debates concerning placing children outside their racial/ethnic background.

Past research has centered primarily on the adjustment of transracial adoptees or self esteem of transracial adoptees. While increasing amounts of literature have attempted to unravel the intricacies of racial identity development in transracial adoptees there is still much to be learned from the personal experiences of the adoptees themselves. Through semi-structured interviews, this study explored how adoptees articulate their own ideas about race, ethnicity, racism, and identity.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a growing body of literature on the subject of transracial adoption. It is essential to consider the existing literature before hearing from the adoptees themselves. Through examination of the literature the intricacy and complexity of the subject areas are revealed and the personal narratives of the adoptees are given an appropriate and thoughtful context. This chapter focuses on issues relating to racial identity development in transracial adoptees and the role that adoptive parents play in this process. The first section contains a description of terms and concepts that are important to this study. The review then moves on to discuss a brief history of transracial adoption in the United States. The third section centers on identity formation and issues of identity for adoptees. A discussion of racial identity development and models of identity development follow in section four. Section five contains information on the self esteem and adjustment of transracial adoptees. The review then focuses on cultural competence for adoptive parents and racism survival skills. In the final section, areas of future research are highlighted. These content areas are reviewed in order to learn what is understood to date and establish the importance of ongoing research in the areas of transracial adoption and racial identity development.

## Definitions and Terms

As mentioned in the preceding chapter, the exploration of racial/ethnic identity of transracial adoptees is complicated by language issues and word definitions. The important concepts of this study, which are transracial adoption, identity, race, ethnicity, culture are social constructions. That is, they exist because society has given them a name and meaning. However, the definitions are by no means universal.

When considering what language to use in this study I read many different thoughts and ideas about race, ethnicity, identity and so on. I found myself in complete agreement with the ideas of Beverly Daniel Tatum (1997), “The language we use to categorize one another racially is imperfect...Yet it is difficult to talk about what is essentially a flawed and problematic social construct without using language that is itself problematic” ( p.17).

The language that I initially chose for this study was merely a starting place. I believed that through my conversations with transracial adoptees they would formulate what language I would use. I decided to follow the lead of the participants, as they are the experts of their own experiences. Those that responded to my search for participants self identified as transracial adoptees, therefore it can be inferred that the term meant something to each of them. In the interviews, I used the language that the individual chose for his or her interview. The goal was not to have an agreed upon definition; that is unnecessary to elicit the emotional and personal experiences of these adoptees.

Nevertheless, in order to give context to the study some preliminary definitions were necessary. Omi and Winant (1994) discuss the difficulty of defining race:

The effort must be made to understand race as an unstable and ‘decentered’ complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle. With this in mind, let us propose a definition: *race is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflict and interests by referring to different types of human bodies* (p.55).

Kirton (2000) offers this definition of ethnicity:

ways which draw on two key elements, namely those of shared common descent and cultural heritage (including language, religion, customs, values, etc.), as perceived by self and others...in popular usage, the word ethnic is usually taken to apply to ‘non-white’ groups (p.4).

Culture is another word that is often used mixed in with race and ethnicity as evidenced by Green's (1982) description of culture as "those elements of a people's history, tradition, values, and social organization that become implicitly or explicitly meaningful to the participants . . . in cross-cultural encounters" (p.6). Race, ethnicity, and culture are social constructions and their definitions are constantly evolving and overlapping, at times these terms intersect and are used interchangeably. With this in mind, in this study the terms will intermix when it seems appropriate for the context.

Since defining these social constructions is a difficult task, of course defining transracial adoption is a challenge. Some adoption professionals choose to describe international adoptees as a separate category from children of color that are born in the United States. Transracial adoption is also referred to as transethnic or transcultural adoption. However, for the purpose of this study, I deferred to McRoy, Zurcher, Lauderdale, & Anderson (1982) for this definition of transracial adoption, “adoption of children of one racial background by families of another racial background,” (p.522). For the purpose of this study, this term included intracountry (within the United States) and intercountry (when the child comes from a country outside the U.S.) adoptions.

Though confusing and somewhat overwhelming these social concepts have helped to shape the history and the policies of transracial adoption in the United States.

### History and Policies of Transracial Adoption

Adopting children from a different cultural background originated for a variety of reasons, but began increasing in popularity because of children who were orphaned during World War II and by the Korean War. At that time in history there were still plenty of healthy, white babies that were available for adoption as well. Therefore, good will appeared to be the driving force behind transracial adoptions, with the intention to provide a family for children whose parents had died in the wars.

However, during the 1950's society was shifting and due to a variety of factors, such as increase in birth control, societal acceptance of unwed mothers, and the legalization of abortion, there were fewer white children in need of adoptive homes (Hollingsworth, 2002). The changing social and political climate also helped to make mixed race families more acceptable in some areas. As a result, as fewer white children became available for adoption, some parents viewed transracial or international adoption as a solution to their desire to parent, instead of simply a goodwill gesture as in previous years.

During the 1960's and 1970's transracial adoption became a highly debated topic in the Black community. Due to the civil rights movement and the societal changes that were taking place at the time, many people saw transracial adoption as suppressing and degrading ethnic minorities (Gaber, 1994). It was in the early 1970's that the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) publicly denounced transracial adoption. In 1972, NABSW released a position paper which stated:

Black children should be placed only with Black families whether in foster care or for adoption. Black children belong physically, psychologically, culturally in Black families in order that they receive the total sense of themselves and develop a sound projection of their future...Black children in white homes are cut off from the healthy development of themselves as Black people, (Patton, 2000, p.50).

In turn, the 1980's brought about a backlash against adoption based on race.

Highly publicized debates, controversy, and legal action brought about the Multiethnic Placement Act in 1994 which prevented racial discrimination when placing children in adoptive homes. However, two years later, evidence was presented to Congress that racial matching was continuing (Bradley & Hawkins-Leon, 2002). Congress then passed the Removal of Barriers to Interethnic Adoption Act in 1996. This act was to ensure race was not considered at all in adoption. The IEA also includes repercussions by which federal funding will be decreased for each violation of this act.

Although most debates around transracial adoption focuses on African Americans and international adoptees it is also important to note the controversy surrounding the common practice of removing Native American children from their tribes. In the 1880's the U.S. federal government enforced a boarding school program for Native American children in the hopes of assimilating them into white culture (Stark & Stark, 2006). Children sent to these boarding schools were often forced to live in deplorable conditions. Other Native American children were removed from their families and placed in white families as state agencies argued that removal was in the best interest of the child (Stark & Stark, 2006). Around the 1930's a movement to stop these types of separations of families was initiated, as tribe members feared the loss of their culture and heritage. However, real change was not set into motion until the civil rights movement of the 1960's. A task force was set up by Congress to review and make recommendations

regarding the how the government dealt with tribal jurisdiction. Finally, in 1978, the Indian Child Welfare Act passed. The ICWA allows decisions regarding Native American children to rest solely with the tribe (Samantrai, 2004).

Despite the range of opinions on transracial adoption, the numbers of international and intracountry adoptions have been on the rise since the 1980's (Grice, 2005). Some experts believe that white parents find it more desirable to adopt internationally than to adopt a Black child for a variety of reasons. One such reason is the idea that lighter skin is more desirable, therefore a child from China, Guatemala, or Vietnam would closer match the adoptive family than many African American children in the United States (Nelson, 2006).

Another reason that adoptive parents may seek to adopt internationally is based on a fear that the birth parents may want to maintain a connection with the child. Adoptive parents may feel that by adopting internationally they are putting a "safe" distance between their adoptive child and his or her birth family.

Although current policies prohibit federal adoption agencies to use race as a criteria in deciding what child is placed with what family, many private agencies try to provide same-race adoptions whenever possible. Public debate continues around this issue, as evidenced by the current position of the NABSW that "transracial adoption of an African American child should only be considered after documented evidence of unsuccessful same race placements has been reviewed and supported by appropriate representatives of the African American community" (2003).

The constant debate surrounding transracial adoption has led the social work and mental health fields to more aggressively research how transracial adoptees have fared.

A popular theme in the research has centered on the adoptees ability to form a healthy identity.

### Issues of Identity in Adoption

Identity is a popular term that is frequently used both to illustrate the uniqueness of individuals and to group people together. Despite the regularity of its use, identity is yet another subjective term with multiple definitions and understandings. In many ways, identity is described as a way to own and share the most salient aspects of a person. In this sense identity not only refers to an individual's uniqueness, but also serves as a way to connect with others.

The idea of identity formation was made popular by Erik Erikson in the 1960's.

Erikson writes:

An optimal sense of identity...is experienced merely as a sense of psychosocial wellbeing. Its most obvious concomitants are a feeling of being at home in one's body, a sense of 'knowing where one is going,' and an inner assuredness of anticipated recognition in those who count (1968, p. 165).

Erikson believed that the context and environment in which an individual matures directly influences his or her identity. While the development of identity is believed to be a life long process by some, according to Erikson, it is a major task of adolescence.

Developing a healthy identity can be a long process for anyone, but for children who are adopted, issues of identity can be compounded. Adoption, under any circumstances, often causes a certain amount of confusion for the adoptee. Core underlying issues are inherent in any adoption, such as a sense of loss. Loss occurs on the part of both birth parents and children, and in many cases adoptive parents are reconciling the loss of having biological children (Deeg, 1991).



At the same time, most adoptions also include varying levels of social stigma. Kinship, relationships built on common bonds of blood or marriage is recognized by all cultures and societies (March, 1995). The societal importance of kinship relationships places adoptive families outside the traditional model of family. The social stigma of adoption can be felt in various ways. Certain disclosures about one's birth family may affect a child's sense of self worth, such as finding out that their birth parent is in jail, or has a substance abuse problem (Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Lash Esau, 2000).

Discussing birth families and adoptive families can be a difficult subject for all adoptees because of society's emphasis on roots, family trees, and how traits are passed from one generation to the next. Many adoptees struggle with a sense of identity because their family of origin is often unknown. March (1995) studied adoptees motivation to search for their birth family and found that many adoptees reported social discrimination on the basis of whether or not they rightfully belonged in their adoptive family. One adoptee describes the difficulties of forming an identity in a society that values blood relationships:

Not only are adoptees often aware that we would have been fundamentally different people had we been raised by our birth parents, but our sense of identity as constructed yet somehow arbitrary, is heightened by the feeling that there are other lives we could have lived, other people we could have been, had some small circumstance surrounding our birth or adoption been different (Patton, 2000 p.21).

Grotevant, et al. (2000) offers a definition of adoptive identity as a process that includes three components: an intrapsychic element, a family relationship section, and a part that involves society outside of the family. These three levels of identity intersect at various points and adoptees must negotiate the differences and similarities between themselves and their familial and social surroundings.

The traditional identity development models neglect the importance of cultural norms or ethnic differences. For this reason it is important to explore the models of racial and ethnic identity development as related to transracial adoption.

### Racial/Ethnic Identity Development

The concept of racial identity development is distinct from the mainstream identity development because it takes into consideration the various cultural constructs that influence identity development. The ability or lack thereof, of white parents to help transracial adoptees develop a healthy racial identity is an important aspect of the debate.

Gail Steinberg and Beth Hall (2000) discuss the intricacies of identity development for transracial adoptees in their book, *Inside Transracial Adoption*. Though they acknowledge that same race adoptees also struggle with identity, for transracial adoptees their race is an obvious marker to others of their adoption. They note, “for children adopted across racial lines, race and adoption often become inextricably connected. Racial differences may serve both appropriately, and at other times inappropriately, as the universal explanation of issues of “not belonging” (p.11).

The obvious physical differences between transracial adoptees and their parents and/or siblings are a crucial aspect of their identity development. Children as young as three years old are aware of racial differences, and skin color appears to be one of the most salient characteristics when children compare themselves to others (McRoy & Grape, 1999; Tatum, 1997). The inability of transracial adoptees to “pass” as a biological member of their adoptive family cannot be overemphasized. This sense of difference from their primary care group can affect adoptees’ attachment and sense of belonging in their adoptive family. Also of importance is the way in which the physical

differences for transracial adoptees make their very unique and personal circumstances of the adoption recognized by total strangers. It is often so obvious that total strangers feel it is acceptable to comment on the situation as if it were not personal.

In the early 1970's many theorists began to expand on the earlier ideas of identity development. A close examination of these different identity development models is beyond the scope of this study, although it is worth noting the progression in this area. Cross (1971) and Jackson (1976) were among the first to construct a racial identity model that took into consideration the unique circumstances of African Americans in a systemically racist society. Sue and Sue (1971) and Kim (1981) developed models of Asian American racial identity development. Other identity development models have been cultivated over the last few decades. Some of these models group together marginalized groups (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1979; Phinney, 1989) while some are specific to a certain race/ethnicity. Despite many differences in these theories, many models agree that identity development exists on a continuum and generally occurs in stages.

Unfortunately, some scholars believe that none of these models seem truly appropriate when applied to the unique situation of transracial adoptees (Baden & Steward, 2000; Tizard, 1991; Tizard & Phoenix, 1994). With this in mind Baden and Steward (2000) developed the cultural-racial identity model that takes into consideration the racial integration of families. This model is particularly useful in the case of transracial adoption for two reasons. First, the cultural-racial identity model accounts for the differences in race and culture between parents and their children. Also, Baden and Steward's model takes into consideration how parent's experiences and attitudes affect

their children's development. Additionally, the impact of peers, extended family, social supports and the wider community are also factored into this model. This model also attempts to discern the differences within the population of transracial adoptees, as opposed to assuming that all transracial adoptees have similar experiences.

Unlike in other racial/ethnic identity models, Baden and Steward separate culture from race. They define culture as, "consisting of the ideals, beliefs, tools, skills, customs, languages, and institutions into which individual are born" (p. 324). Racial groups are defined as, "groups who are distinguished or consider themselves to be distinguished from other people by their physical characteristics and by their social relations with other people" (p.325). The model consists of the cultural-identity axis and the racial identity axis. The following is a description of these two axes and how they are connected (p.324-328):

The Cultural Identity Axis has two dimensions:

1. Adoptee Culture Dimension- the degree to which transracial adoptees identify with their own racial group's culture (i.e. if the adoptee is Korean, to what degree does the adoptee identify with Korean culture.
2. Parental Culture Dimension – the degree to which transracial adoptees identify with their adoptive parents' racial group's culture (i.e. because most transracially adoptive parents are white, to what degree does the adoptee identify with white culture.

There are four possible cultural identities: Bicultural Identity, Pro-Self Cultural Identity, Pro-Parent Cultural Identity, and Culturally Undifferentiated Identity.

The Racial Identity Axis also has two dimensions:

1. Adoptee Race Dimension – the degree to which the adoptees identify with their own racial group
2. Parental Race Dimension – the degree to which adoptees identify with their adoptive parents' racial group.

There are four possible racial identities: Biracial Identity, Pro-Self Racial Identity, Pro-Parent Racial Identity, and Racially Undifferentiated Identity.

The final model combines the Cultural Identity Axis and the Racial Identity Axis which results in 16 possible identity statuses that can be used to describe transracial adoptees.

The cultural-racial identity model is an important tool in help individuals with multiple identities. Transracial adoptees, parents, and professionals can use this tool to help understand identity development.

Another look at transracial adoptee development comes from Leslie Doty Hollingsworth. She has written extensively on the issue of transracial adoption, mainly with African American adoptees and white adoptive families. She explores the ways in which adoptees form their identities and how they define themselves. Hollingsworth utilizes the theory of symbolic interactionism to support same- race adoption for children of African American descent. Symbolic interactionism states that, “humans become social beings through the process of interaction and communication with others. Symbols such as language and rituals facilitate this process” (Hollingsworth, 1999, p.4).

With this in mind, one can use this concept to explain that the African American community is essential for children to become socialized in their African heritage. Hollingsworth believes that exposure to one’s culture is imperative in healthy identity development. Her research has found that when adoptees are dissimilar from their adoptive families they are unable to form a complete personal identity and are more likely to search for their biological parents later on in life (Hollingsworth, 1998a).

McRoy, et al. (1982) compared the racial identity development of both inracially and transracially adopted children. They found that Black transracial adoptees who lived in integrated communities and attended diverse schools were more likely to feel positive about themselves as Black people. Likewise, in families where race was deemphasized and no Black role models were provided the children had a tendency to devalue or ignore their Black identity.

Though McRoy et al. (1982) concentrated on Black adoptees, Huh and Reid (2000) investigated the ethnic identity of Korean transracial adoptees. Huh and Reid found that in order to develop a healthy ethnic identity there needed to be open communication about the adoption between parents and children, as well as participation in Korean cultural activities. They stress the importance of the parents' role in providing a positive environment regarding the heritage and ethnicity of their child.

When discussing transracial adoption, the idea of healthy racial identity development is significant because many adoptees have expressed difficulties in self-esteem directly related to their racial identity (Smith, Walker, Fields, Brookins & Seay, 1999; Yeh & Hwang, 2000).

#### Adjustment and Self Esteem of Transracial Adoptees

Racial identity development is a part of a much larger topic of adolescent adjustment and identity formation. There is some evidence that for minority adolescents racial/ethnic identity and pride can contribute to self esteem and psychological adjustment (Phinney, 1990). When discussing the adjustment of transracial adoptees, the experts remain divided. Feigelman (2000) identifies one controversial question: whether or not the transracial adoptee becomes marginalized in the majority society, and also within the minority community. This question potentially leaves transracial adoptees without a clear sense of where they belong, which affects their overall adjustment. A key factor to keep in mind in comparing the following studies is that there are varying definitions of racial and ethnic identity that these researchers have operationalized.

Feigelman's study compares the adjustment of adopted children in both transracial and inracial adoptions. He conducted a survey of how adoptive parents

viewed their grown children's adaptive functioning. The average age of the adoptees in this survey was twenty-three, whereas most studies that have been done have centered on young children. The focus on young adults is critical because this is the point in life that racial or ethnic identities become more important. The study found that the community (whether racially mixed or heterogeneous) the transracial families lived in was directly related to how the child viewed his or her appearance. While the study concludes that both of these groups had similar adjustment issues related to adoption in general, there is a potential bias because the study information came from parents and not the adoptees.

Another look at the adjustment of transracial adoptees comes from Burrow and Finley (2004). They offer a multimeasure empirical study of how transracially adopted adolescents compare to same race adoptees. This quantitative study looks at twelve different domains of adjustment for six hundred and nine adopted children. Burrow and Finley found that transracial adoptees fare sometimes better, sometimes worse, but, on balance, about the same as their same-race adopted counterparts across the different adjustment measures examined. The extent to which these findings can be generalized to all types of TRA, however, is qualified by the fact that most of the transracial adoptees in this study were Asian adolescents adopted by white parents, with only a very small number of Black adolescents adopted by white parents. Burrow and Finley assert that multimeasure approaches are necessary to provide the most significant and thorough evaluation of developmental outcomes for transracially adopted adolescents. Investigating multiple areas pertinent to adolescent adjustment will help to uncover those domains in which, same race and transracial adoptees manage differently or the same.

Simon and Alstein (2002) conducted a long range study, which began in 1972, that explored the impact of transracial adoption on adoptees. Using the Self Esteem Scale they found the adolescents in their study to show no differences in self esteem based on race or adoptive status. Simon (1994) has also stated:

I believe it is important to emphasize that our studies show that transracial adoption causes no special problems amongst the adoptees or their siblings... Our data show that transracial aspect does not involve special problems, traumas, or heartbreak. There was, for example, not a single instance of a disrupted adoption amongst the families we studied (p.149).

Another study was performed by McRoy, et al. (1982) and compared self esteem and racial identity in a group of inracial adoptive families and a group of transracial adoptive families. Their exploratory study found no significant difference in self esteem for the two groups. However, there was an interesting difference among the adoptees:

Transracially adopted children were more likely to identify themselves as being adopted and to use racial self-referents than inracially adopted children. It seems plausible that transracially adopted children are more conscious of their racial group and adoptive status because their physical dissimilarity from their family and peers is a constant reminder (p. 525).

Despite the findings of these studies it is important to remember that the studies on transracial adoption have mainly focused on the racial/ethnic differences of the adoptees and their parents (Baden & Steward, 2000). Many of these studies have neglected the impact that individual characteristics of families and parents have on the development and psychological adjustment of the adoptee. For instance, if an adoptee is placed with a family of the same racial background as he or she, but the adoptive family is verbally or physically abusive or neglectful it can be assumed that the adoptee will suffer despite their inracial adoption. Future studies need to take into consideration not



only race, but also parenting skills, cultural competence, and environmental factors in order to have a more authentic picture of the adjustment of transracial adoptees.

### Cultural Competence for Adoptive Parents

Adoptees have many similar issues that transcend issues of race and ethnicity; however many experts believe that transracial adoptive parents require a certain level of racial understanding in order to effectively parent their children. McPhatter (1997) has defined cultural competence as it applies to the child welfare field as “the ability to transform knowledge and cultural awareness into health and/ or psychosocial interventions that support and sustain healthy client-system functioning within the appropriate cultural context.”(p.3). She also discusses the importance of growth in areas such as enlightened consciousness and grounded knowledge base.

The idea of cultural competence is replacing the previous concepts of “accepting diversity” and “cultural awareness.” With cultural competence, the goal is not only to accept and be aware, but also to become knowledgeable about different cultures. Cultural competence is a developmental process that occurs along a continuum and is a measurable construct against which individuals and organizations can be assessed.

Some criticism of transracial adoption stems from the idea that some adoptive parents choose to adopt transracially in an effort to diversify themselves. Kim Park Nelson (2006) writes that international adoptive parents, “simultaneously see their foreign-adopted children as enriching, authentically exotic, and yet part of the family, therefore no different from the parents themselves,” (p.103). Some adoptive parents expect to learn about the child’s ethnicity or culture from the child and often this is impossible due to the young age of many adoptees. Some opponents of transracial

adoption including, Nelson, have labeled this as the “cultural commodity” side of adopting foreign children.

When examining the importance of cultural competence for transracial adoptive parents, it is important to have a clear meaning of the term specific to the realm of parenting. Elizabeth Vonk offers a three-part definition that consists of racial awareness, multicultural planning, and survival skills (2001). With this idea she expands on the parents’ responsibility to be self aware about their own racial attitudes and beliefs. Also, it is vital that parents create avenues for their transracial children to explore and participate in their birth culture. Finally, through survival skills the parents must help their children learn to cope successfully with racism. Vonk stresses the notion that cultural competence involves a long term commitment to a developmental process. Parents must be willing and able to transform knowledge and cultural awareness into specific interventions that will help their adoptive children develop a healthy racial identity.

A culturally competent adoptive parent would be able to teach his or her adopted children about their birth culture and foster and support relationships within that racial or ethnic group. This is a daunting task for some, particularly in the case of infants who are adopted internationally. These children have no memories of their birth culture and their adoptive family serves as a gatekeeper to their cultural heritage. A transracial adoptive parent is often in a unique position of power regarding a child’s birth history and can choose to provide opportunities to connect with the child’s racial or ethnic heritage. Some parents may feel inadequate to teach their child about a culture or ethnicity that they themselves are not a part of, however several studies have shown the importance of

learning about race and culture from adoptive parents (de Haymes & Simon, 2003; Moffat & Thoburn, 2001; Vonk, 2001). Through integrating cultural activities or holidays into the family, adoptive parents can help give their children a sense about their heritage, (Huh & Reid, 2000).

Along with parents learning about their child's racial and culture heritage, Carstens & Julia (2000) discuss the use of a cultural consultant, someone who is of the same racial background as their child. A cultural consultant would be able to provide insights into the birth culture, as well as serve as a role model during identity development. Carstens & Julia also advice that adoptive parents seek out diverse neighborhoods and communities so that their adopted children will have a variety of peers and neighbors with whom they can identify and perhaps emulate. Offering a diverse environment may help transracially adopted children to feel less separate from their family and their community.

Additionally, Masatti, Gregoire & Vonk (2004) developed the Transracial Adoption Parenting Scale (TAPS). Utilizing the ideas of racial awareness, multicultural planning, and survival skills, the TAPS serves a tool for both prospective and current transracial adoptive parents. The TAPS can also be used to assess the learning needs of parents and also as a way to monitor the effectiveness of training offered to parents.

Other studies have promoted the idea of cultural competence as a necessary task in transracial adoptive parenting. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, Moffat and Thoburn (2001) interviewed two hundred and fifty four transracial adoptees who were adopted twenty to fifteen years previous. In the quantitative analysis they found that not all transracial placements are successful, if success is defined as the

children having an overall sense of well being in regard to their ethnic origin. Through the qualitative analysis they found that some white families could successfully parent a child of different ethnic origin in a way that affirmed a sense of culture and heritage. However, they emphasize that parents in transracial adoption must look at cultural competence as an additional task to negotiate in an already difficult job of adoptive parenting. Overall, their suggestion is congruent with the “UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption, and the England & Wales Children Act 1989 for children to be placed whenever possible with families from their own local or wider communities” (p.18).

In 2003, de Haymes and Simon conducted a qualitative study exploring a number of transracial placements and adoptions, with the goal of identifying, from the perspective of the families interviewed, the types of services that would be most useful to these placements. The researchers interviewed twenty children between the ages of eight and fourteen and their parents. De Haymes and Simon found that children in transracial adoption and foster homes felt that society, as a whole, forced them to choose a racial identity. The children surveyed expressed both ambivalence and negative responses to their racial identity. The parents in the study identified areas in which they struggled with their foster or adoptive child. De Haymes and Simon use the results of the survey to illustrate the necessity of cultural competence for foster or adoptive parents. The research suggests specific areas of training for potential transracial adoptive parents that mirror Vonk’s (2001) suggestions.

On a more personal note, Jaiya John (2005), a transracial adoptee, wrote an autobiographical account of growing up in a transracial adoptive home. John discusses the need he had for his mother to understand what he was experiencing:

She was the center of my life, and as my life evolved into a processing of constant racial messages and interactions, I needed her to play the role of conductor, explainer, and the one who made the bad things go away. She neither understood the totality of what I was beginning to choke upon nor was composed of personality to pull free what was choking me (p.65).

This author depicts his adoptive family as well intentioned and very loving. Yet, without conscious attempts to help their adopted son understand and embrace his racial identity and the racism that existed in society, their son struggled well into adulthood.

Another aspect of cultural competence is the acknowledgement that racism exists in our society. Transracial adoptive parents need to be open and honest with their children about the inequality that exists so they are not blind sided by racism when they are out of their comfort zone. The question of whether or not white parents can equip their adoptive children with the skills to adequately deal with the inevitable racism in society is a source of much debate.

### Racism Survival Skills

Camara Jones (2000) presents a three level framework for understanding racism in today's society. Racism exists on the institutional level, personally mediated level, and the internalized level. Jones defines these levels:

*Institutionalized racism* is defined as differential access to the goods, services, and opportunities of society by race. Institutionalized racism is normative, sometimes legalized, and often manifests as inherited disadvantage, (p.1212).

*Personally mediated racism* is defined as prejudices and discrimination, where prejudice means differential assumptions about the abilities, motives, and

intentions of other according to their race, and discrimination means differential actions towards others according to their race, (p.1213).

*Internalized racism* is defined as acceptance by members of the stigmatized races of negative messages about their own abilities and intrinsic worth. It is characterized by their not believing in others who look like them, and not believing in themselves, (p. 1213).

Many opponents to transracial adoption believe that white people are unable to fully grasp the intricacies of these three levels of racism and the subtle ways that it plays into the daily life of non-whites. People of color who oppose transracial adoption insist that white adoptive parents, “cannot experience minority...they will rear a psychologically defenseless individual, incapable of understanding and dealing with the racism that exists in our society” (Simon & Alstein, 2002, p.16). Unfortunately, people of color struggle with prejudice on a regular basis in our society and for transracial adoptees this can be intensely confusing and painful.

Particularly in the case for children adopted from Asia there is the idea of a “model minority,” which can be summarized as the belief that, “Asian Americans, through their hard work, intelligence, and emphasis on education and achievement, have been successful in American society, (McGowan & Lindgren, 2006). The concept of a model minority is certainly based on racist ideas though it is not always recognized as such. In fact, many white adoptive parents feel that this “positive stereotype” will help to counteract or even negate the racism that their children will experience.

W.E.B. Dubois (1903) wrote about oppression and racism and identified the concept of the “double consciousness” of African Americans:

born with a veil, and gifted with a second-sight in this American world, - a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double –

consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity (p.5).

Dubois discusses this ability to negotiate between different identities. He also emphasizes the importance of people of color to be aware of how racism fits into everyday interactions. Contemporary scholars now interpret the double consciousness as a necessary survival skill for oppressed individuals and groups (Patton, 2000). A child of color who is raised by white parents may not have the opportunity to fully realize and accept the ways in which racism plays into his or her life until they are much older, and this can be particularly difficult for some adoptees.

In *Birthmarks*, Sandra Patton (2000) discusses the intricacies of what she calls “navigating racial routes,” (p. 62). In society people of color are often depicted in stereotypical ways such as “welfare queens or deadbeat dads.” Transracial adoptees must somehow incorporate these social narratives of people of color into how they view themselves. Patton (2000) elaborates on this concept:

A Black male body carries a different social message than does a White male body. These racial codes of social identity are conveyed and understood through public narratives of race that shape the way people are seen and treated in everyday social interactions. A Black man had to deal with such encounters, which often involve police, throughout his lifetime. Thus, of necessity his sense of self is constructed and maintained in interaction with public narratives which define Black males through crime, unemployment, drug addiction, and gang violence (p.68).

Transracial adoptees must be prepared by their parents that racism is a reality in our society. Unfortunately, parents are unable to protect their children from racism and without a deeper understanding of the racism that exists in the world these adoptees are left vulnerable and unprepared as they reach adulthood.

In attempting to help their children deal with issues of racism, it is imperative that transracial adoptive parents look within themselves first. White parents need to examine their own racist attitudes and beliefs, along with those of their family and community. This requires a certain level of self criticism and honesty that can be very emotional. “Being white in this society almost by definition means rarely having to think about it. Whites must exert a special effort to become deeply aware of their own and other’s racism” (Feagin & Vera, 2005)

In trying to prepare a child to deal with racism in the world, parents first must focus on helping their children develop a positive self image. A healthy identity is the first step to facing racism because it gives the child a secure foundation (Grice, 2005).

#### Areas of Future Research

Much of the literature that has been reviewed offered recommendations for future study which has helped to formulate my study on how transracial adoptees perceive their racial identity and the role their parents play in their identity development.

Vonk (2001) has suggested the following questions be investigated for future research,

“Does parent training in cultural competence affect the adoptee's racial identity and adjustment? Are there particular parts of cultural competence that are more or less

important for the adoptees' racial identity and adjustment?” (p. 254). Another area of

future research has been suggested by Feigelman (2000) who wonders, “Whether

minority children would be as well protected against American racism as they might be in same-race-parent households (p.182).

Other questions for further research are provided by Hollingsworth (1998b) around the framework of transracial adoptees that are satisfied with their adoptive



experience and have had no adjustment difficulties or confusion of his or her racial identity. Hollingsworth suggests a study that looks at these “successful” adoptive families and ask, “What is unique about these families and how can social work practitioners make use of the knowledge of what works for them” (p. 317). Baden and Steward (2000) have also pointed out that adoption professionals need to explore the differences that exist amongst transracial adoptees. Much of the current research focuses on how transracial adoptees, as a whole, fair when compared to other adoptees. Since adoptive arrangements are so varied, such as the difference between an open or closed adoption and the differences between an intercountry versus an intracountry adoption, each unique situation presents a unique set of complexities for transracial adoptees.

Although it would be impossible to fully incorporate all of these suggestions into my study I attempted to combine the most salient ideas.

### Summary

As illustrated by this literature review, the ever changing nature of society and social constructions inhibit the resolution of the debate surrounding transracial adoption. As previously stated even the language itself that we use around this topic is subjective and ever changing. Intertwined with the language issue is the current societal shift from promoting a “colorblind” attitude to a more respectful acknowledgement and embracing of differences.

Several articles point to the salience of race in identity formation, as well as the complexity of identity development for a child that does not look like their family (Baden & Steward, 2000; Patton, 2000; Steinberg & Hall, 2000; Tatum, 1997). At the heart of this study is the personal narratives of those that have been transracially adopted and their

experiences with identity formation; their stories will help to guide future social policy and practice. The methodology used in this study is explained in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to investigate how transracial adoptees view their racial identity and what role parent(s) play in identity development. Information was obtained through semi-structured interviews. The interviews explored how race and racism was addressed in the home and how the adoptees define themselves as adults.

#### Sampling

Twelve participants were interviewed for this study. The study was reviewed and approved by the Smith College Human Subjects Review Committee (see Appendix A). The participants were a non random sample of adoptees who were raised by parents of a different race, at least 18 years of age, and willing to participate in this study with no monetary compensations. All but one participant identified as female, with one male participant. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 32 at the time of the study and were between three months and six and one half years when they were adopted.

Participants were recruited using a snowball technique. Emails and flyers were given to personal contacts detailing the purpose and design of the study and requesting that the information be forwarded to potential participants (see Appendix B). Additional participants were recruited through posting the recruitment flyer on websites such as Craig's list and Adoption.com (see Appendix C).

### Data Collection

Potential participants contacted me and I followed up on all inquiries and explained the next step in the process. I then sent out two copies of the Informed Consent, one to sign and return to me and one for the participants' personal records (see Appendix D). Once the signed Informed Consent was returned, I called the participants to schedule an interview. Five of the interviews took place in a mutually agreed upon location and due to geography and time limits, seven of the participants were interviewed over the telephone. All of the interviews were recorded for transcription purposes. The use of recording equipment and accurate transcribing reduced the possibility of error in data collection. Interviews lasted from approximately 15 to 30 minutes each.

Interviews followed a standard set of questions (see Appendix E) with variation for clarifying questions or if I chose to pursue a topic in more depth. Interview questions included both closed and open ended questions. The closed ended questions were intended to capture the demographics of the sample and the open ended questions allowed for more in depth exploration of personal experiences.

In order to enhance reliability, I kept a journal log of reflections after each interview to check for personal bias or other issues. Reliability was also enhanced through my attempt to ask questions in the same way with each participant, although sometimes clarification questions were needed in some interviews.

### Data Analysis

Due to the semi structured nature of the data collected during the interviews the grounded theory model was used to guide my data coding and analysis, (Anastas, 1999). This model involves overlapping stages that begin with "opening up" of the data by

assigning provisional codes to all the indicators distinguishable in the data (Anastas, 1999, p. 424). The unit of measure of coding was words or phrases. Interviews were reviewed for common themes, description of experiences, and discussion of racial identity development. Participants' responses to the questions are reported in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

This study sought to collect information on how transracial adoptees perceive their racial identity and how their parents contributed to their racial identity development. In addition, this study investigated how adoptees felt that racism played into their identity development and how their parents may have helped them cultivate survival skills for coping with racism.

The main findings of this study indicate that half of the participants feel that their unique position of transracial adoption made developing a racial identity a complex process. Many participants discussed a multifaceted racial identity that is a combination of their race/ethnicity and their adoptive families' identity as white Americans. In contrast, the other subset of participants do not feel that their race/ethnicity plays into how they identify themselves in any other way except for the visible, physical difference.

When discussing their parents' role in their racial identity development, the majority of participants feel that their parents either were or would have been supportive if they had wanted to explore their birth heritage. However, all of the participants reported that the areas they grew up in were predominantly white at that time, which may have contributed to a certain level of denial of difference on the part of the adoptees and their families.

With regard to how racism played into their racial identity development, surprisingly, the majority of participants said they are uncomfortable labeling their experiences as racism. However, all of the participants reported experience with some amount of teasing or the use of racial slurs. The level to which these experiences influenced the participants varied greatly throughout the sample.

The major findings of this study are explored in greater depth in this chapter. The first section provides demographic information of the participants including age at the time of the study, gender, age at adoption, occupation, and whether or not they had children of their own. The chapter then moves on to a discussion of the adoptees' definitions of transracial adoption and their understanding of why their parents adopted transracially. The third section provides a descriptive picture of the participants' adoptive families. The fourth section looks at the type of community/neighborhood the adoptees grew up in and what kind of community they had chosen to live in at the time of the study. The fifth section includes a discussion of the adoptees' racial identity and how their parents recognized and/or facilitated their racial identity development. The influence of racism on identity development and racism survival skills are the focus of the sixth section. The final section contains advice from the adoptees to potential transracial adoptive parents. While these sections have been broken down to organize the data, many themes overlap between the sections due to the interconnectedness of the subject matter.

### A Demographic Profile of the Sample

The first five questions of the interview served the purpose of gathering demographic information. At the time of this study, participants ranged in age from 20 to

32, with an average age of 28. At the time of their adoption the participants were between the ages of three months and six and one half years old, all but three of the participants were adopted before they were a year old.

One participant identifies as male and the rest identify themselves as female. Seven of the participants were adopted from Korea, one from Honduras, two from Vietnam, one of whom identifies herself as half Vietnamese and half American as her birth father was an American soldier. Two participants were born in the US and they both identify themselves as biracial. One participant is African American and Mexican and the other participant is African American and Caucasian.

Five of the participants had children of their own at the time of the study; and in all but one case the other parent is was white. Additionally, eight of the participants shared that they were, at least at the time of this study, involved in long-term relationships, with all of these, except for one person, with white partners.

At the time of the study two of the participants were in college; the rest of the participants had completed a college education. Of the ten who had finished college, three are in the field of education, three are in the social work field, two are administrative assistants, one is a financial planner, and one is an insurance claims adjuster.

#### Definition of Transracial Adoption and Reasons Why Parents Adopted Transracially

Though the literature that was reviewed for this study offered many different definitions of transracial adoption, interestingly most of the participants in this study hold similar definitions: “Adoption of a child from one racial background into a different racial background” (Kathleen), “An adoption that was between people of different races,



in my mind I tend to think of it as a white family adopting people of other races (Amanda).

Surprisingly, Sam admitted he had never actually thought about what transracial adoption means; nevertheless his definition is consistent with the other participants. Sue reported she had never heard the term before she received the email regarding this study. However, she assumed that it refers to her adoptive situation because one of her friends had specifically forwarded the recruitment email to her.

When asked about their understanding of why their parents adopted transracially, most of the participants did not have a definitive answer. Most of the interviewees said that they had never asked their parents why they chose to adopt across racial lines and they could not recall their parents having initiated any specific conversations on this topic.

Eight of the participants discussed having some understanding of the motivation behind why their parents chose adoption in general as a way to build a family. These reasons include infertility and wanting a child of a different gender than their biological children. The sense that most of the participants received from their families was that their parents had just wanted to adopt a healthy child and race/ethnicity did not play a large role in their decision:

Well, from the impression that I get...she really just didn't care about that. She was colorblind, she didn't see a particular race and she just wanted to adopt a baby and the agency that she went through offered her, um, biracial babies first and she didn't want to wait. She wasn't one to just be picky and wait around for a white baby so...(laughing) she adopted me (Emily).

I don't think they had a preference as to my ethnic or cultural background. I just think they wanted to have more kids and couldn't have anymore of their own. For them it was just like a healthy baby was all that was important (Cynthia).

Additionally, both Signe and Amanda thought that it might have been easier to adopt internationally at that time than it was to adopt domestically. This fits in with much of literature surrounding transracial adoption at the time (Kaslow, 2003). Historically, the number of infants that were available for adoption in the US had decreased, while the number of available infants had increased on an international level (Register, 1991). Also, in regard to domestic transracial adoption, there was a backlash from the National Association of Black Social Workers who vehemently opposed adoption of Black children by white parents (Patton, 2000).

Curiously enough, Sam and Sandie both discussed being aware that their mothers had specifically been interested in adopted a child of their racial background. However, neither of had a clear understanding of what was behind their mothers' desire. Sandie reported, "My parents wanted a kid from a different ethnic background, my mom really wanted a Spanish kid; she wanted a girl." Sam talked about his perception of his mother's motivation in this way:

I don't know....you know the exact reason why my parents decided to go to Korea to adopt I'm not sure. I guess, uh, I know that my mom always wanted an Asian child for some reason, I guess she always thought they were cute or something. Um, but I never actually asked her specifically why (Sam).

A few other participants spoke about having a sense about why their parents adopted transracially. For these participants there was a social justice or community service aspect to the adoption. They discussed feeling like their parents had wanted to contribute something to society. As Kathleen put it, "They felt that adoption from another country would be a good way to help out the world and all of the children who

were without parents.” Also, both Sam and Amanda emphasized that a religious conviction may have been part of their parents’ decision to adopt transracially:

I grew up in a very conservative community, with Christian schools, and like I said Holt was a Christian adoption agency and I think there’s a sense of charity and almost like mission work to adopt internationally. And so for some people, definitely not all, there was a sense of goodwill almost (Amanda).

For some adoptees the idea that their parents were motivated by a religious mission work or a desire to contribute to society creates an uncomfortable sense about how they came to be in their families (Kim, 2006). Though some of the adoptees in this study expressed pride in their parents’ decision to “help a child,” others mentioned that the notion of altruism was unsettling:

Um, I get the sense, and this is really interesting because we never really had a very direct conversation about this, but um my mom and my dad, um, it was like around the fall out after the Vietnam war and they had seen pictures of like all these orphan children from Vietnam, but then when they went to the agency they said it was more popular to adopt from Korea and I don’t know. I guess it was also a function of them wanting to adopt internationally and they were pulled, you know kind of this social justice way and um, they couldn’t adopt a Vietnamese child and that’s how they adopted a Korean daughter. They adopted my sister (not biological sibling) first and then they adopted me... And even that has some underlying, like racist undertones because you know the white savior coming in to like the other culture, and I think its hard for adoptees because you don’t want to admit that your adopted because people took pity on you, you know regardless... I love my family, and I loved growing up in my family I feel very fortunate, but just at the time when my parents adopted there was just a lack of the education piece and it was fall out from the sixties civil rights movement and there was the backlash because, more in terms of the adoption of African American children, so you know there was that uh, notion of colorblindness and oh you’re just one of us (Mary).

Despite the controversy and the discomfort for some participants with the charitable notion behind transracial adoption, other participants embraced the idea of that their parents were contributing to society through their adoption. They hoped to one day emulate what their parents have done and “give back” to society:

I'll tell you, from my perspective I'm planning to adopt, I'm planning on having my own children, but I'm planning on adopting as well. For me, I've been so fortunate uh, I'm blessed with so many opportunities, that I don't, I'm not sure would have been there for me, you know my life's pretty good. Uh, I feel that you know I need to give back, uh, almost to my parents who made sacrifices to get me (Sam).

I think transracial adoption is great, I think its wonderful because its an opportunity, I, I was in such a war torn country and to have this opportunity to come here and then to have the parents that I have is just an amazing, amazing opportunity and actually my husband and I are thinking about international adoption as well, you know, to give another child a chance that I had um, so I think it's a wonderful, wonderful journey. But at the same time it's really hard (Amy).

#### Description of Adoptive Families

One of the participants is an only child, one has only a transracially adopted sibling, one has white siblings who were adopted, six have siblings who were their parents' biological children, and three have both transracially adopted and biological siblings. Most participants mentioned that they are often the only ones of a different racial background among even their extended families.

Olivia was the only one who described her family as diverse: "My cousins are actually Jewish, so very diverse." Amy, Emily, and Sam all discussed the feeling of sticking out in family photos or at family gatherings because of the obvious physical difference between them and their families. As explored in the literature review, transracial adoptees have the unique position of wearing their adoption status through their physical appearance. This allows even total strangers to have information that is of a very personal nature (Patton, 2000; Steinberg & Hall, 2000).

When discussing their extended families four of the participants mentioned being aware of some family members who were racist. Mary and Emily talked about having this knowledge growing up:

I guess like some of my dad's brothers and sisters apparently they didn't approve of, of my parents adopting Black kids and I always knew, we always could tell growing up that you know, we didn't spend a lot of time with a couple of my dad's brothers and sisters... they just kind of didn't approve and so they didn't really want to be part of our lives or something like that (Emily).

But my dad's mom was also, not like racist like really, just more like she still used the phrase "coloreds or negroes" and stuff like that. My mom's parents were more like racist so that was kind of weird when I was; I guess it was my early or late childhood early adolescences when I began to really feel kind of different. I remember watching... the football games and stuff and they showed one of the football players families and you know, it was a Black, African American family and like my grandfather said 'you know what that is?' and he said that's a nigger convention or something like that I mean it was just really overt racist. And after that I was just like 'augh, like, God what does he think about me or my sister?' And then I thought, I wonder what they said to my mom when she was talking about or did she even talk to them about adopting us. I don't know, I never really asked her that though because I think I was kind of scared of the response, you know. I didn't really want to know what they had said, the truth, but they never treated me differently than any of the other kids, but I think that began my internalized racism (Mary).

Internalized racism occurs when people targeted by racism begin believe the negative stereotypes and messages of the oppressors (Jones, 2000). Turning the vicious messages of racism against themselves can be extremely damaging to their self respect and ability to form a cohesive racial identity (Tatum, 1997)). For transracial adoptees whose experience of internalized racism begins within their adoptive family, developing a healthy racial identity can be particularly challenging (Harris, 2006).

Though the interview questions were focused on the adoptive family, most of the participants freely shared that they have no knowledge of or contact with their birth families. However, Olivia spoke about her experience of having an open adoption and

how her relationship with her birth family has aided her formation of a more cohesive identity formation:

I keep in touch with my birth mother; we had an open adoption so that's how I've kept in touch with the Mexican part of my heritage. More recently I've spent more time with my birth mom. I think that's been a huge important part of my identity now, because of the fact that I was able to meet them and my whole life I had grown up in this white family, you know not fitting in, not looking like my parents. And now its like 'I look like you' or look like my dad and when I finally met my birth father and my birth mother and people saw the pictures and they say 'oh you have her smile' and its kind of like I fit in here, like that's where I came from (Olivia).

Olivia's story touches on the importance of role models of the same racial/ethnic background as the adoptees. Though Olivia's birth family is able to provide information about her culture and ethnicity, for other adoptees it could be a family friend or other members of the community.

#### Description of the Neighborhood/Community- Past and Present

When asked if the neighborhoods or communities they grew up in were diverse, most participants were quick to respond with a definitive "no." Thus, these adoptees all had the experience of having very little representation of diversity in their daily lives:

NO, NO, uh-huh, my and my brother were it! We were the ink spots in the bowl of milk! No, very white, very white (Emily).

Not diverse, predominantly white, definitely (Signe).

No, no, no, not at all! Back when I was being raised my mom said there were hardly any resources and it was just a different generation I guess (Amy).

Olivia talked about how her parents had realized that she was not being exposed to any amount of diversity and so they moved so that she could have the opportunity to meet people of similar racial backgrounds. However, though the school district that they

moved to was very diverse, her parents chose to live in a predominantly white neighborhood, as she reported it:

The neighborhood was mostly white and a lot Jewish actually, I'm pretty sure I was the only one for a while there. After preschool we moved there because of the diversity of the school system, which they felt was important to me growing up and I wasn't getting that. The school system, I went to public school, it was very diverse and our high school was one of the biggest in the state. We had ESL students, it was very diverse. Growing up in my neighborhood though, I hung out with all white kids really until high school I did have Black friends, but my closest friends were all white. I just still kind of denied the fact that I needed to sit down and figure out who I was and where I fit for a long time (Olivia)

Olivia's story illustrates the importance of the type of neighborhood where transracially adoptive families live.

Only four of the participants currently live in an area that they consider to be diverse, and only two of these said that it was important to them when they decided where they were going to be living. When answering the question about the level of diversity in their current neighborhoods, many participants talked about how they relate to other members of their racial group:

You know its interesting because (friend's name) and I have been friends for a long time we came over on the same plane together and we kept in contact, but she was my only Asian friend for a long time. I never dated any Asian men and then even now, when I go to get my nails done, I go to a spa down the street, they are all Vietnamese women. They think I speak the language; they talk to me as if I understand and I forget sometimes that I was brought up in a Caucasian community. And when they said 'oh you don't know, you don't know' (laughing) I guess it takes me back, uh, a little bit, because if I wasn't looking in the mirror, you know! Of course they're saying 'oh you're Vietnamese or you have some Vietnamese in you and I don't understand you don't speak the language you don't know anything about your parents.' So its kind of awkward at times, because you know I always had to explain myself - I was adopted when I was one, I'm half Vietnamese, half American, my father was you know an unknown American soldier, um, so I feel like I can't relate. People categorize sometimes by what you look like, um, so its very complicated, and its hard too when people want family history and I, I just don't know, it's hard to relate I think (Amy).

It was weird in the sense that okay that I didn't hang out with them (other Koreans) in college. The Korean Americans that I started hanging out with after I graduated college I felt comfortable with them, but I felt still like I didn't completely fit in or belong. I worked in this restaurant, and there were two girls that were Korean, there was a guy who was Korean and then the owner was Thai and, um, the Thai owner he was like 'you're not Asian' because I was pretty, you know, I grew up and assimilated into the white culture so he didn't really consider me to be Asian or Korean. Um, but the girls that I hung out with didn't care. They would cook me food and we'd go to the Asian market and I just felt like it was a time in my life where I was really starting to explore it more, you know the culture... But again there was that feeling of kind of 'in betweenness' like I didn't completely fit in or belong with the Korean Americans and I still felt like prejudiced, white people prejudiced me, I didn't feel like I really belonged with white people either...It's an interesting split I think that transracial adoptees go through (Mary).

#### Recognition of Racial Differences, Racial Identity, and Parents' Contribution to Racial Identity Development

When asked about how their parents had recognized the respondents' race/ethnicity, their experiences varied greatly. The majority of participants feel that their parents downplayed the racial/ethnic differences that exist in the family. For some participants there was very little conversation regarding racial/ethnic differences:

My mom had mentioned it, I mean it was, my mom had mentioned it when I was younger, that I had come from Korea which was very far away and that was it! I think she might have mentioned something about the girls in that culture, um, kind of being given up more easily (Signe).

They really didn't, I'm not sure how much they even knew about my birth culture, I don't think much at all and I know that they really wanted me to feel like I fit in with the family. They sort of had this colorblind attitude, like I was their child and that was it. I may not look the same, but I was the same on the inside and that's all that mattered, end of story (Cynthia).

Some participants felt that their parents tried to find a kind of middle ground for acknowledging differences. In most of these cases, the participants discussed their parents' decision to take cues from their children about how much to talk about the racial



distinction. The stance that many of these parents took was to answer questions that their children had, but not to pressure their children to delve any further than they were willing to go.

Two of the participants, Amy and Sandie, discussed forming a relationship with a friend of the family who is of the same racial background as themselves. Both of their family friends would come over and cook for the family and try to share basic information about the culture. However, Sandie's parents also sent her mixed signals: although they had this friend who would cook Spanish food they did not encourage Sandie to keep her native Spanish language (she was adopted at age six and a half). Instead, they pressed for English as the only language. Also, when discussing racial identity development Sandie recalled, "They didn't try to help at all, like everyone just really wanted us to speak English and were like its America ...so they didn't really try to pass a lot of my Spanish side."

Along with the relationship with a Vietnamese friend of the family, Amy also mentioned that her parents had kept her birth name as her middle name as a tribute to her birth culture:

I appreciate the fact that my parents gave me my birth name. I, I didn't at first, I thought it was so different and I changed it at confirmation...what if everyone laughs at me, they don't know how to spell it, or what it means, and you know, um, so yeah it was a big deal for me (Amy).

Sue's story touches on a critical, thought provoking question that many transracial adoptees struggle with, especially those that are adopted at a very young age. How much of their identity is tied to the family they were raised in and how much is connected to their birth heritage? She responded in this way:

My parents have never, um, not like over recognized or have been negative, definitely never been negative towards it, um, just kind of- it is what it is, it was just accepted, it was never explained to me... I've always asked 'how did you tell me I was adopted like did you sit me down and did you go through the whole conversation?' and they're were like no, one day you just came up when you were like , I don't even know, like little, probably five or something and I just asked 'why do I look different?' and they're like 'you, you were adopted', like a simple answer, a simple conversation like passing through the room and I was like 'oh okay' and I went off and did whatever, like that was it. They would, um, my mom would make, you know, sometimes make different Korean foods, that I don't like (laughing) there's like one Korean dish that I like, um so through that, but I mean, not like you know for example taking me or enrolling me in that Korean camp. You know, they never did that, I think they would have done it if they knew I was interested in it. So I think they were waiting for me to make an interest in it and they definitely would have let me do it. It's probably awful to say, but I don't know anything about my heritage but, is it my heritage? That's the good question (Sue).

Sam shared that his mother would give him gifts that were focused on Korean culture: "Every year for Christmas, she got me something small that kind of represented something from Korea for example one year she got me, um, these little pamphlet/books they were pretty neat they were on all types of Korean culture."

Emily talked about how her mother gave her pictures and posters to put up in her room that represented Black culture. Emily also recalled reading books such as *Roots* and *Autobiography of Malcolm X* and discussing them with her mother. Though she definitely expressed gratitude about her mother's willingness to expose her to her racial background she did point out the following:

Now that I've gotten to know like other Black families and stuff, it was more of the way that a white family would try to introduce another culture... from an outsider's point of view, just to make me be aware of it, but it wasn't really like, ah, okay, like basically we, we weren't eating soul food, and we weren't, you know, the real nitty gritty of the culture, but she just wanted me to be aware.

When exploring how the participants' parents contributed to their racial identity development, many participants feel that their parents had very little, if any, available

information about the racial/ ethnic, or cultural aspects of their children's birth heritage. While many participants feel that their parents were supportive of their exploration of their race/ethnicity, most reported that their parents were often unable to provide them with direct information themselves.

Some of the participants discussed their parents' desire for them to learn about their birth culture or race, including offers to take them to the country they were born, buying books with characters of similar ethnic backgrounds, or trying to expose them to food from their birth culture.

Interestingly, however, although some parents tried to encourage their children to explore their heritage the desire to fit in with the dominant culture was often a stronger pull for the adoptees. This was a pervasive theme in the interviews, particularly during adolescence; most participants discussed a need for assimilation with their peers and family. Since all of the participants grew up in neighborhoods that were predominantly white, many of them discussed a sense of denial about their own differences and a resistance to developing a racial identity:

They did often try to expose me to both my Latin and my Black heritage by books and by introducing me to other kids that they knew, um, in the school system and I was put in brownies, and swim team, a whole bunch of different, you know, activities. But what I do know is that when I was younger I didn't really want to be involved with all that. I wanted to fit in; I didn't want all the attention. I didn't want people to talk to me specially because I was different. And so I would say that they did try to put that on the table and get me involved and make me aware of everything, but I wasn't very open to it (Olivia).

The adoption agency sponsors trips to Korea and culture camps, etc, and my mom was always very encouraging about me doing that, but I was like whatever, who wants to do that? I grew up in (Midwest state) which is like pure white. My mom was always very encouraging of that, but I just didn't take onto to it (Amanda).

My mom has always been much more interested in me connecting with my culture than I ever was. She was always very big on me learning about Korea... I think from a very early age she's always been very open and supportive of not, uh, not, I'm searching for the right way to say this....not being embarrassed about where you came from and not denying, but embracing it, and even when I maybe wasn't interested at that age, she was always very supportive in, in pushing that. And there was a time when I was like, I don't feel Asian, I mean I had no culture in me, um, you know I don't know any of the language, I've only seen pictures, I don't really know very much at all and so I was kind of you know defiant to the fact that I was even basically Korean at all. I was in my early twenties before I showed any interest in embracing my culture. But you know if they had never done that, even when I was not receptive to it, even when she gives me these books and I turn red in the face and feel like she's trying to shove this down my throat, I put it under my bed...And I think that now, later in life, um, that makes a big impact on um on me (Sam).

Both Sam and Mary discussed their mothers' desire for them to find an Asian partner. Neither of them feels like they knew exactly why their mothers pushed them in this arena. Mary feels that it had a great deal to do with her mother's own race issues and her inability to explore her white racial identity. Sam relayed that, "I guess she envisioned all these Asian babies running around or something, I don't know." Sam and Mary's mothers may have also experienced some amount of guilt about the life that their children may have had if they had stayed in their own country.

For some participants their identification with their birth race/ethnicity remains on a very physical, visible level. In describing her identity Sue said, "I always say Asian, now that I think about it. Do I feel Asian? No, not one bit, not one bit at all, my brother says that I'm more American than apple pie." Similarly, Kathleen reported:

I always considered myself American and my family and friends treated me the same way. In fact so many of them always said they forgot I was Asian...It wasn't until college that I felt somewhat like a minority when the Minority Affairs club tried to get me to join. It was really weird because I had never considered myself a minority in the past. So I never joined. It made me feel uncomfortable and weird and I already felt like I fit in.

Many of the participants discussed a real intricacy in how their race/ethnicity fits into their overall identity. This was a question that was often labeled as “difficult to answer” or “hard to put into words.” Amanda talked about her race fitting into her identity, “It does definitely, I can’t really explain how it does, it just does, but it’s definitely been more of a recent process.” Signe talked about feeling that there is a complexity to how she identifies herself, “Specifically no, not being Korean because I wasn’t, my parents didn’t share a lot of the culture with me, but in the sense of being a minority, I identify with being a minority.” Amy’s self concept is equally as convoluted:

As an adult, well I appreciate it more, I didn’t growing up and I’m ashamed to say this, but um because I grew up in such a Caucasian community and no diversity, I never knew I was really different. People didn’t point that out ...and it didn’t really hit me until college when people started becoming more interested in my story with the Baby Lift and to me I was a little bit embarrassed growing up, um, feeling different, looking different...I just didn’t want to be different growing up so I really didn’t embrace it until about college. But now um, I definitely embrace it, I don’t have a lot of Vietnamese friends um my husband’s Caucasian, but, um, you know I’m proud of my heritage, but it wasn’t really a part of my identity for a very long time (Amy).

Mary shared a very poignant way that she incorporates her racial identity into her overall identity:

I definitely identify myself as a Korean American Adoptee, like I make the distinction between, I don’t identify as Korean and I don’t identify myself as American, like I can’t just say I’m an American without the Korean...definitely as I became an adult I embraced my racial identity a lot more... I struggled with it a lot, you know, especially in adolescence when you know you’re trying to figure out who you are and um I just felt so unattractive I just felt like I was never going to have people like me (Mary).

## Effects of Racism on Identity Development and Racism Survival Skills

Surprisingly, the majority of participants reported not really experiencing overt racism either in their childhood or now as adults. In fact, Kathleen stated, “I was never discriminated against.” However, later in the interview she relayed:

On occasion older adults would ask me how I liked it here. So I would reply ‘well Earth is just fine and if you are referring to America, I was 7 months old when I was adopted so you can imagine all that I remember about my birth country.’

On the other hand, Signe discussed feeling strongly that racism has shaped many aspects of her life:

Oh, yeah, when I was growing up, I grew up in a predominantly white neighborhood and going through school was very difficult because I was made fun of a lot for being, not Korean, but Chinese... to them it was the same thing, um, so yeah I think that has a lot to do with my poor self esteem and other things (Signe).

Emily shared that as a biracial person she has a dual experience with racism:

When I first tried to start to explore my Blackness, they (other Black people), they would be racist towards me because I acted so much like a white girl and they would just be like ‘okay she’s not Black’ and I didn’t realize this at the time, but I know now just from I guess life experience that being biracial, being light skinned, and having fewer of the more characteristic, um, African features kind of gives me an advantage, an unfair advantage, that I’m not proud of and a lot of Blacks resent that also. So here they see this, you know, light skinned Black girl who is so well accepted by the white community and why is she trying to be one of us? On the white side... I can remember this as early back as like fourth grade... never really, really, they never really, really, really, the white people never really accepted me. (laughing) I mean, just little racist comments like ...this one guy said ‘you’re, you’re kinda pretty for a Black girl.’” That’s something that I remember from when I’m a kid, so of course that goes straight to how I felt about myself, that, those were racist comments and so you know, that made me think, well damn, it devalued me, I didn’t feel as good, as completely good as the white girls.

Some of the participants discussed ways in which institutionalized racism has played into their identity formation:

Yeah, I mean I had very few overt experiences with racism, I definitely had them but they weren't, it wasn't like everyday going to school and kids saying things to me, but it definitely happened. You know when we would travel across the country you know it would come up too. But it was more what impacted me and shaped me the form of racism was just more of the institutionalized racism. So there were just these general cultural assumptions and the fact that you know when I was growing up there was really no Asian representation in the media, in pop culture at all. It really didn't exist, you couldn't turn on a television show and see like Asians. There was this one show that came out, but I was already like late high school or college that had like a Korean, Margaret Chou called American Girl, I don't think it even lasted a whole season. Other than that you might see the token Asian role but other than that it was really not represented. So I really felt, again, like I was so different from yeah...so that's really the biggest form of racism that I experienced which contributed to my internalized racism (Mary).

The participants were also asked about whether they feel that their parents prepared them to deal with racism. This question produced a wide spectrum of answers from the participants. Only Olivia reported that her parents had in fact prepared her for the inevitable racism that exists in our society. However, as she clarified:

Yeah, I mean as much as they could, because you know they didn't really have the, they knew what they had heard and what they could read in books, you know they experiences that other people talked about but they never really had that first hand experience with it so as much to their ability they exposed me to the fact that it will happen, and I will have friends that were friends with me when I was little when race wasn't such a big issue and then maybe not be my friend as I get older and I will have questions like 'why are your parents white, why don't you match them' (Olivia).

Some of the participants recalled that their parents took a much less proactive stance, but when instances of racism would occur their parents would talk with them about it. The general message that these parents gave to their children is that other people are ignorant and they should just ignore the slurs, teasing, or other incidences of racism: "You're going to have to deal with people who are ignorant and stupid and you know that you are a good person and it shouldn't matter" (Sue). "No, it was never like a

preemptive thing...like there was never the talk about this might happen out in the world so be prepared, that didn't happen" (Cynthia). "Not really, I mean when I would come home and complain about like being called Twinkie, white on the inside, yellow on the outside. They would just say 'oh they're stupid' or whatever, but they didn't like really talk to me about it" (Alicia).

Both Amanda and Mary discussed a sense that their parents' did not actually have a real understanding of the racism that exists in our society: "I don't think they prepared me... in the sense that I didn't understand it, but I don't think my parents understood it, like I'm not sure of their own awareness was at that level" (Amanda). Mary feels that her parents were more interested on focusing on the positive points of her adoption than discussing the negative encounters that occurred:

I think it made them feel uncomfortable and you know because they did this very, I think, they adopted me out of this love and desire to give me a better life and so I don't think they really wanted to acknowledge the negative aspects of like what I encountered then growing up in this white world. So no they didn't ever really prepare me in any way.

Interestingly, Sandie responded to the question about preparation for racism by sharing that her parents had sent her to a therapist, "ever since I (she) was little." Additionally, Signe and Emily discussed the ways in which their parents tried to smooth over the episodes of racism with a sense that other people were just admiring them or wanting to get their attention:

We would always get a lot of stares and, um, I think that was racism, if not a hatred towards our situation, just, you know unfamiliarity, like people didn't understand and they didn't know why. She (mom) would say, whenever we would get the stares and everything whenever we were out in public...it would be uncomfortable, you know, and she would say 'no, no, they are just staring because you're so pretty, you're so beautiful,' you know, like that. They never talked, or would tell us how to deal with something like that or how to approach



or talk to these types of people and so I always just grew up being respectful of them, when they had no respect for me. So, I don't really think that they, they really prepared us for racism, I, I, um I think maybe it was more of like the turn the other cheek type of thing...pretend its not happening and just go about your day (Emily).

When I came home crying, a lot of it we had a housekeeper who would be home when I got home so she would comfort me as best she could. My mom knew about some instances I'm sure, but she would just say 'oh don't listen to them.' I found out later that I don't think anyone told my dad or he was just ignoring it. At the time my mom would say 'Oh, just ignore them, they like you, they're just trying to get your attention,' that kind of thing, which is such a bad thing to tell your kids because it just messes you up. I mean I think in part they were trying to get my attention because I was different, but that probably wasn't the best way, but basically my mom was like just ignore them, so it was not good, they did not prepare me (Signe).

#### Advice for Potential Transracial Adoptive Parents

One of the main themes that arose from asking the participants to give advice to potential adoptive parents is to have a degree of awareness and level of education regarding their adoptive child's birth culture and/or race. Many participants mentioned that if their ethnic or racial heritage had been a normal part of their growing up it might have been easier for them to embrace:

Know about the culture and country from where you adopt, I think that would be a big piece of it, my mom always encouraged me to find out about my culture, but I think if she knew stuff and could teach me it would be more normal like here this is (Korean food name) instead of having to send me somewhere else to learn about it (Amanda).

I would say they need to educate themselves about these issues you know, and for one they need to be aware if they have any internalized racism or you know that maybe they haven't even been able to identify- so educating them. I think there definitely should be like mandatory trainings, not trainings really, but you know what I mean, like groups that they have to go through where they are learning about the issues and racism and how it could impact their child and how to cope with it you know um, and you know I think it is important to at least give your child the opportunity to explore more their racial background or nationality or culture if they want to and they might reject it and say 'ugh why are you doing this', but at least give them that option instead of just like avoiding it (Mary).

If you're going to adopt a child from another country you should have some interest in that country, um, you know, because its going to be real important, someday, to that child and if you show very little interest or very little support in that, you know, I think that that says something...I guess just putting a little bit more thought into why you want to do it. And being very deliberate in where you're going and why (Sam).

I think you need to be open and honest with your kids about what you are thinking and why you are adopting them. I don't think it's a bad thing, but I think that things could be a lot better if you acknowledge the difference between you and your kid. I think it would be cool to know about where I came from and I think that kids should have that opportunity. Obviously you are different from your parents and it's important to even just put that out there, like 'we're different, and its okay, but we are different and here's how.' I think parents should have to learn something about their kids' birth culture because someday the kid might ask and it feels weird for your parents to not know about a part of you (Alicia).

I would just say prepare yourselves...but you can only do so much research, but to get involved with the community whether its Chinese or African American or Latino, to make sure you know how to be involved in the community so that your kids can have some sort of connection somewhere (Olivia).

Other participants took a stance that was less focused on acknowledging differences:

I would say go ahead, go ahead, it's a good idea. And I think if people just take the time to learn who people are as a person, there probably won't be any more racism and that's really all it takes. And the attitude is, you know, you're better than or I'm better than – that has to fade away and I think you can only teach somebody that, um, through life experiences, like having dinners and family gatherings and just events so I think it's really important. Just give people a chance, that's who we really are just people. Skin is just the largest organ in our body and it just happens to be different colors (Cynthia).

If you have good ethics and methods of teaching and explaining differences of various cultures and are comfortable with yourself and your beliefs then you should have no issues with adopting trans-racially and raising a child in a trans-racial family. Being caring, loving, upfront and open with children is an effective way to gaining trust and understanding. That is how my parents were with me and I think I turned out just fine (Kathleen).

Go for it, I feel like why does it matter? You want a baby, a baby is a baby. Doesn't matter if they're a different race, different color, do it. Babies are in orphanages they don't have parents. The vice principal at my school, he and his wife are adopting a baby from Guatemala and he asks me all kinds of stuff all the

time. I'm just like, 'she'll be fine, she really will.' I don't know, I'm all into celebrities...that's probably weird or whatever, but the whole thing with Madonna adopting that boy and everybody was like 'oh she didn't go about it the right way' and all that stuff. Who cares? She saved a child, who cares how she did it, you know? A baby is baby (Sue).

While the majority of participants are very supportive of transracial adoption and feel that they are fortunate to have been adopted, Signe talked about how she had been very opposed to transracial adoption for quite some time. Her account touches on the inevitable reality that the numbers of transracial adoptions will continue to grow in today's society:

For a really long time I thought it was not a good thing and I really resented seeing these white women with Asian kids, but then Oprah changed my life (laughing) I'm kidding. But, she had this thing on where these cameras went into a Chinese adoption agency and this poor little Chinese girl was in this room and was just like left to die and so I was like well I guess that is much worse than coming to the States and being made fun of. So I joke around, but I think that was a huge turning point, like, I don't think my situation was that dire, but maybe it was. But I'm glad I'm here and I think about all the kids that are in all these other countries, or even in this country that might be like different races or whatever and just the fact that their going to be better off with a loving family, regardless of the person's race (Signe).

The main findings of this study indicate a split between participants as to the salience of race/ethnicity to their identity formation. Half of the participants do not feel their race/ethnicity is particularly salient to how they identify other than on a physical level. The other half feels that as transracial adoptees they occupy a unique identity that combines their birth heritage and that of their adoptive family. As illustrated through their personal stories different parenting styles, experiences of racism, and different levels of connection to their birth heritage greatly influences how the participants view their racial identity. Further implications of these findings are discussed in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

Through narratives of personal experience, this research study examined how transracial adoptees perceive their racial identity and what role their parents played in their identity development. This study sought to further the understanding of the unique position of transracial adoptees in terms of racial identity. In this chapter the literature presented in Chapter II and the emergent themes from Chapter IV are compared and contrasted. Also included in this chapter are the implications for social work practice that are illuminated by this study, the strengths and limits of this research study, suggestions for future research, and an overall conclusion.

As previously noted, literature on transracial adoption suggests that a healthy racial/ethnic identity for transracial adoptees is cultivated through a number of interrelated techniques. Several studies have illustrated the importance for transracial adoptees of learning about race and culture from their adoptive parents (see, for example, de Haymes & Simon, 2003; Moffat & Thoburn, 2001; Vonk, 2001). For many transracially adoptive parents, however, the idea of teaching their children about their birth heritage and fostering relationships with their child's ethnic or racial group can be a daunting task (Dorow, 2006; Register, 1991; Rothman, 1995). Many adoptees, including the majority of these participants, are adopted at such an early age that they have no memories of their birth culture, and so it is completely up to the adoptive parents whether

or not they provide their children with opportunities to learn about and identify with that racial/ethnic heritage.

In review, some of the most common suggestions regarding how adoptive parents can help to foster the development of a positive racial identity include providing cultural consultants for the adoptees (Carstens & Julia, 2000; McRoy, et al., 1982), becoming self aware of their own racial identity (Vonk, 2001), discussion and recognition of racial differences (Alstein et al., 1994; Tizard, 1991), participation in ethnic activities (Huh & Reid, 2000), living in racially/ethnically diverse neighborhoods (Feigelman, 2000), and providing skills for dealing with racism (Vonk, 2001).

#### Neighborhood/Community- Past and Present

When participants were asked about the diversity of the neighborhoods and communities they grew up in, all were quick to respond that often they had been the only representation of diversity. From this swift response it can be inferred that on some level this lack of diversity was an extremely poignant aspect of the developmental awareness of racial differences on the part of the adoptees. As mentioned in Chapter II many studies have found that the community (whether racially mixed or heterogeneous) in which transracial families live is directly related to how a child views his or her appearance (Feigelman, 2000; McRoy, et al., 1982). Although there may be diversity within a school system or in activities like a summer camp or dance lessons, clearly it is important for adoptees to see visual representations of diversity in their neighborhoods.

Interestingly, the majority of participants in this study continue to live in mostly white neighborhoods or communities. This suggests a certain level of comfort with the

dominant culture or perhaps a sense of familiarity, given that all of the participants grew up in predominantly white areas.

Additionally, eight participants mentioned some amount of unease in relating to other members of their racial/ethnic group, a sense of “disconnection” that is also indicated through the finding that seven of the eight participants who were in a long-term relationship at the time of the study had white partners.

The idea that some transracial adoptees feel detached from the birth heritage relates directly to how parents recognized their race/ethnicity and did/not encourage them to develop a racial identity. Huh & Reid (2000), who found that many transracial adoptees have very little interest in exploring their own ethnic or cultural background, hypothesize as follows: “It is possible that the children who (show) a lack of interest were responding to subtle parental cues that might have discouraged such interests from developing in the first place” (p.85). One such cue for these participants might have been their predominantly white communities and neighborhoods.

#### Parents’ Recognition of Difference

When looking specifically at parents’ recognition of their adoptive child’s ethnicity or race, the majority of participants feel that their parents downplayed the differences within the family, a finding that is in line with some of the literature (Alstein et al., 1994; McRoy et al. 1982). In many of the participants’ homes there seemed to be a lack of focus on race or ethnicity; instead, the parents were attentive to making the children feel like a natural part of the family and of the greater white culture as a whole. Some of this could be attributed to the “colorblind” attitude that was so prevalent when many of these parents adopted as well as to the fact that in the 1970’s and 1980’s, when

most of the participants were adopted, there were many fewer resources for adoptive parents than today (Patton, 2000; Simon & Alstein, 2002).

In line with the literature most of the participants who felt that their parents had minimized their racial differences did in fact have difficulties with their identity development at some point in their lives (McRoy et al., 1982; Patton, 2000).

Interestingly, one participant in particular repeatedly stressed her assimilation into the dominant white race and appeared almost in denial of her racial identity, making the following comment in the course of her interview:

We lived in the suburbs – two story house, dog, *typical American family* (Kathleen’s emphasis)... no issues regarding my different race... I was loved as though I was their biological child never felt anything different... I always consider myself American, and my family and friends treat me the same way. In fact, so many of them always said they forget I was Asian. I was never discriminated against... When the Minority Affairs club tried to get me to join, it was really weird because I had never considered myself a minority in the past, so I never joined. It made me feel uncomfortable and weird, and I already felt like I fit in.

Kathleen’s experience can be linked to studies that have found that transracial adoptees who either minimize their ethnic/racial identity or deny any similarities between themselves and members of their own ethnic/racial group often had parents who were reluctant to focus on racial difference (McRoy et al., 1982).

Other participants mentioned that their parents had acknowledged their racial or cultural heritage, but through “common ways,” such as ethnic foods, books or posters with diverse racial representation, or offers to travel to the participants’ birth country; and participants whose families shared information or at least made knowledge available were appreciative:

I just can't reiterate enough...how persistent my mother - both my parents were - on me embracing my culture because...probably until I was in my early twenties did I show any interest in embracing my culture. And I think that now, later in life that makes a big impact on me (Sam).

Sam's feelings are also in line with the literature on how adoptive parents can help facilitate their children's' identity development (Carstens & Julia, 2000; Huh & Reid, 2000; Tizard, 1991). However, as some participants pointed out, learning about race/ethnicity from white parents can be complicated because of their inherent "outsider's point of view." Again, having a cultural consultant or becoming involved in the child's racial/ethnic community could make this a more smooth process for the adoptee (Carstens & Julia, 2000; Huh & Reid, 2000).

Interestingly, although the parents of some participants tried to encourage them to explore their heritage, many participants had very little interest in delving into their ethnic or racial background when they were younger. In fact, for most of them, the desire to fit in with the dominant culture was often a stronger pull, a theme that was pervasive in the interviews. Many participants admitted that particularly during adolescence, they had desired and thus discussed the need to assimilate with both their peers and their families. Again, perhaps this is explained by the homogeneity of their communities and extended families (Huh & Reid, 2000; Patton, 2000; Tatum, 1997).

### Racial Identity

As Beverly Daniel Tatum (1997) eloquently wrote, "The salience of particular aspects of our identity varies at different moments in our lives. The process of integrating the component parts of our self-definition is indeed a lifelong journey" (p. 20). Tatum's observation is important to keep in mind when analyzing participants'



responses regarding significance of race/ethnicity to their identity. The participants of this study, though small in number, hold a wide variety of feelings, perspectives, and attitudes about the incorporation of race into identity. Perhaps this is attributable to the fact that none of the participants were over 32 at the time of the study, and therefore, still in process of developing and formulating a mature identity.

Many of the participants in this study exemplify the notion that a transracial adoptee's identity exists in "a space between" the usual social constructs and everyday ways that we identify one another and ourselves. The adoption experience places these individuals in a unique position, and as Patton (2000) discusses, transracial adoptees must navigate between different cultural expectations. As three participants put it:

I definitely identify myself as a Korean American Adoptee... I don't identify as Korean, and I don't identify myself as American, like I can't just say I'm an American without the Korean... Definitely as I became an adult I embraced my racial identity a lot more... I struggled with it a lot, you know, especially in adolescence when you know you're trying to figure out who you are (Mary).

I had a lot of people telling me, "You know, you aren't white. Why do you act like that just because your parents are? They aren't your real parents, so you shouldn't act like that." ... Some of my parents' family (wasn't) too nice to my brother and I, and it took them a while to see us (Sandie).

I mean I know I'm Asian, but I don't feel Asian. Like I get really upset when other Asian people try to talk to me and then they get mad because I don't know the language. It's not my fault that I was adopted, and sometimes I feel like I'm looked down on by other Asians, because I don't really identify with being Asian. How could I? It was just never presented to me (Alicia).

### Racism

#### *Experiences of Racism*

Unfortunately, racism is extremely prevalent in our society, increasing the need for a positively defined identity in order to survive psychologically (Tatum, 1997). Still

and somewhat surprisingly, there seemed to be a hesitation on the part of most participants to label their experiences as racist, and many did not think that they had had too many experiences with overt racism. Instead, many described “teasing or bullying” centered on their appearance. Perhaps the hesitation to classify this as racism is related to how their parents responded when their children encountered racial discrimination because many parents had in fact glossed over racist incidents with such comments as: “No, they are just staring because you’re so pretty. You’re so beautiful” (Emily) and “Oh, just ignore them. They like you. They’re just trying to get your attention” (Signe). Perhaps it is also a result of the fact that many members of our society are complacent to accept a certain level of racism as the norm and the fact that many white people wish to believe that racism is a thing of the past (Tatum, 1997).

It is also possible that the hesitation to label experiences as racism is related to participants’ connection to and identification with the dominant white culture. For example, Amanda touched on this in discussing her experiences:

I really struggle with having this place of being a person with identification with the dominant culture and feeling the ‘white guilt’... My family wasn’t exactly the most non-racist family... like my grandpa’s endearing term for me was his ‘little Chinaman’ which is like, you know, horrible (laughing); at the same time I had no awareness of how horrible it was growing up – it was just his endearing little term in a bizarre sort of way (Amanda).

Another interpretation might be related to socioeconomic positions of the families. As discussed previously, adoption is often an expensive process, and so very frequently adoptive families have a higher degree of economic status (Kaslow, 2003). As the families of all participants appear to have been in the middle to upper class, perhaps

that higher social status contributed to the children's experiencing fewer incidents of racism.

### *Racism Survival Skills*

In terms of discussing race, the majority of participants relayed that their parents had not been proactive in discussing racism. In fact, in response to a question about being prepared for racism, Sandie said that her parents had sent her to a therapist "ever since I (she) was little." Clearly, at least some parents did not feel it was within their own capability to tackle this complicated topic with their children, and there are several possible reasons as to why. Perhaps there was a sense that to openly discuss racism would make it more real and widen the divide between them and their children. Possibly parents had not truly explored their own white racial identity and prejudices. Perhaps they had no real sense of what their children were going through and thus felt inadequate to discuss this issue. Also, conceivably people who adopted Asian children somehow felt that because they were from Asia they were somehow impervious to racism (see the discussion on the "model minority" concept in Chapter II).

### *Development of Internalized Racism*

Socially accepted ideas which are based in racist notions, such as the concept of the "model minority," are poignant for many of the participants as these stereotypes often lead to internalized racism. Internalized racism occurs when people targeted by racism begin believe the negative stereotypes and messages of the oppressors (Jones, 2000). Turning the vicious messages of racism against oneself can be extremely damaging to one's self respect and to one's ability to form a cohesive racial identity. In addition to

experiences of racism in greater society, some of the participants discussed racism within the context of their extended families:

My mom's parents were more racist, so that was kind of weird...I wonder what they said to my mom when she was talking about... or did she even talk to them about adopting us? I don't know. I never really asked her that, though, because I think I was kind of scared of the response, you know? I didn't really want to know what they had said - the truth; but they never treated me differently than any of the other kids... I think that began my internalized racism (Mary).

Our societal notion of family is often based on an idea of acceptance and unconditional love. For Mary and other transracial adoptees whose experience of internalized racism begins within their adoptive family, developing a healthy racial identity can be particularly challenging (John, 2005).

As illustrated through this discussion of the different factors that come together to influence racial identity development for transracial adoptees, programmatic revisions to the process of transracial adoption are imperative.

### Implications for Practice

#### *Programmatic Shifts in Transracial Adoption*

The adoption field has changed drastically over the years and policies and perceptions surrounding transracial adoption have shifted greatly as well. Through an examination of the personal experiences of transracial adoptees it is clear that the social work/adoption field needs to adapt their current adoption programs/policies to focus more on issues regarding the development of racial identity. The findings from this study suggest that both pre-adoptive and post-adoptive programs should focus in more depth on the complex areas of racial identity development, cultural competence, and issues of racism.

For example, one suggestion for transracial pre-adoptive planning is for potential parents to participate in an assessment of their understanding of their own racial identity. A misguided concept for many white Americans is that they have no racial identity (Dalton, 2005). Through educating adoptive parents about their identity as well as about the nature of their white privilege, people may be more open to educating their adopted children about their racial identity. Pre adoptive parents need to go through the process of exploring their personal bias, stereotypical beliefs, and exploring the systemic white privilege that they benefit from on a regular basis. For example, through examining everyday events, such as going shopping, and how this simple task is experienced differently by white people and people of color, pre adoptive parents can begin to examine their own privilege. Potential adoptive families should participate in family therapy to explore these issues prior to being approved to become transracially adoptive parents. If a potential adoptive family is unwilling to participate in family therapy, the adoption agency should question their motivation for adopting transracially.

Pre-adoptive parents also need to be introduced to and educated about the unique position of transracial adoptees. As previously stated, transracial adoptees often view themselves as falling into “the space between” majority and minority cultures. Clinicians can be valuable resources to help adoptees and their families understand and embrace their identity in both of these groups. One way to examine transracial adoptee identity is through an implementation of a cultural-racial identity model, such as that of Baden and Steward (2000), which takes into consideration the racial integration of families. Having social work clinicians help facilitate racial/ethnic awareness in families could help transracially-adopted children to maneuver between both the majority and minority

communities (Deacon, 1997). In fact, many researchers believe that the ability to negotiate this dual identity is an imperative step in developing a positive racial/ethnic identity (Deacon, 1997; Huh & Reid, 2000; McRoy et al., 1982; Tizard, 1991).

Just as important as pre-adoptive planning, post-adoptive services and support should be made available to parents as well as to adoptees. Since identity development is a lifelong process it stands to reason that long-term support is needed for both parents and adoptees. At different points, particularly during adolescence, issues of identity might well become more salient; and a strong foundation of open communication and support from a young age can lessen that confusion. Post-adoption services should offer a variety of modalities to assist in the development of a multiracial family identity. For instance, parents and children may need to separately attend therapy or a support group and at some points it may be more appropriate to use a family therapy model.

One participant in this study, Mary, spoke about her belief that there should be a program to match transracial adoptees with older transracial adoptees to serve as role models as well as support systems. Because of their unique position, transracial adoptees would benefit greatly from these types of relationships.

#### *Professional Development for Social Workers Working in Transracial Adoption*

In order for the above programmatic suggestions to be effective, there needs to be an increase in professional development for clinicians. Those who work specifically with transracial adoption need to be educated about their own racial identity, as personal bias can always influence decisions, including those related to children. Education regarding the importance of developing racial/ethnic identity, the importance of forming relationships with people of similar racial/ethnic backgrounds, and the significance of

recognizing and openly discussing racial differences should be mandatory for social workers who wish to work in transracial adoption. Also, clinicians who work with transracially adoptive families should be educated about the different racial/ethnic groups of the children who they place in families so that they have useful information to offer the families.

Changes to both the education of social workers in the transracial adoption field and the services available in pre and post adoption can collectively help create a more balanced, thoughtful, and respectful experience for transracial adoptees and their families. Along with discussing the implications of the findings in this study, it is important to examine both the limitations and strengths of this research study.

#### Limitations and Strengths of This Study

There are several limitations of this study that should be acknowledged as they may have had effects on the findings. One of the most significant limitations is that the snowball sample technique used for finding participants produced a relatively homogenous sample so that many participants had similar family, economic, and class backgrounds. It is impossible to know if these backgrounds mirror those of the transracial adoptees population at large, but due to the high cost of adoption (particularly intercountry adoption) it is likely that their socioeconomic status is fairly consistent with the general such population in terms of income (Kaslow, 2003). Also, the snowball sample yielded seven participants adopted from the Asian continent. Thus, while certain themes ran through the findings regardless of racial identity, much of the information gathered does relate to Asian adoptees.

With regard to the instrument, the interview questions were not always asked in the same order depending on the “flow” of the narrative. Thus, in some cases, participants answered subsequent questions in their discussion of other topics, which may have affected the nature and depth of the data. Also, the findings rely on participants’ retrospective accounts of experiences and emotions, which, although a strength, might also be interpreted as a limitation because of the capacity to alter stories, either consciously or unconsciously, or due to inaccurate recall.

Self selection of the participants is another limitation, and it is possible that transracial adoptees who volunteer to participate in studies such as this one may vary significantly from those who do not. They may feel more comfortable with their adoption experience overall, for example, or feel that they have reached a certain level of understanding regarding their race/ethnicity.

Finally, the small sample size of this study makes it impossible to generalize the findings to a broader population, although it did yield very interesting food for thought, suggestions for future research, and implications for practice. Thus, while the sample was small, it provided rich personalized narrative data. Another strength is that this study focused on direct narratives from transracial adoptees rather than deferring to second-hand information social workers or family members.

#### Suggestions for Future Research

The findings of this study raise interesting questions for future research. As discussed previously, the participants in this study were very much still in the process of forming their racial identity. Future research could center on a longitudinal study of changing perceptions over time. Another suggestion is a study that examines whether or



not adoptees who grew up with one or more transracially adopted siblings develop a more positive racial identity than those adoptees who are the only non-white members of their families. Finally, examining the current practices and policies of adoption agencies regarding the education of potential transracially adoptive parents is also a suggestion for future research, as is the existing practices and policies, if any, in the education of professionals who work with this population.

### Conclusion

The findings of this research study reflect the shifting concepts of identity, race/ethnicity, and family. Findings support the notion that the racial/ethnic identity of transracial adoptees exists in a unique “space between” the strict dichotomies of traditional racial identity. Although transracial adoption continues to be a controversial topic, there is still an obligation for those in the social work profession to help provide the optimal situations for transracial adoptees to flourish and to embrace their distinct identity as transracial adoptees. It is imperative that as a profession we take a leadership role in facilitating this process.

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## APPENDIX A

### HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW APPROVAL



Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063  
T (413) 585-7950  
F (413) 585-7994

December 17, 2006

Kristen McCully  
48 Sanderson Street  
Greenfield, MA 01301

Dear Kristen,

Your amended materials have been reviewed and all is now in order. This is a very interesting and useful topic and I hope you got lots of adoptees that want to participate. You have done a good job on your revisions. I think the two questions you formulated may well bring forth some very crucial and interesting information.

All is now in order and we are happy to give final approval to your project.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain signed consent documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your study.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ann Hartman".

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.

Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Dominique Steinberg, Research Advisor

**WANTED:  
TRANSRACIAL  
ADOPTTEES**

(from any country, including  
the U.S.)

**AGE 18 AND OVER**

Are you interested in sharing your  
story?

If so, I'm seeking your  
participation for a research study.

***Participation is confidential.***

If interested please contact Kristen McCully:

Phone: (413) 773-2679

Email: [kmccully@email.smith.edu](mailto:kmccully@email.smith.edu)



## APPENDIX C

### RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Hi, my name is Kristen McCully and I'm a student at the Smith School for Social Work. I'm working on my thesis which deals with transracial adoption and racial identity development. I'm wondering if you would be able to pass my information along to anyone you think might be interested in participating. I am seeking participants that are transracial adoptees and who are over 18 years of age. Participants would have a brief interview with me lasting approximately 25-45 minutes. Thanks so much, take care,  
Kristen

Kristen McCully  
[kmccully@email.smith.edu](mailto:kmccully@email.smith.edu)  
48 Sanderson Street  
Greenfield, MA 01301  
413-773-2679

## Appendix D

### Informed Consent Form

December 2006

Dear Potential Research Participant,

My name is Kristen McCully, and I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting a study on how transracial adoptees perceive their racial identity and what role their parents played in their identity development. Data obtained in this study will be used in my master's thesis.

Your participation is requested because you are a transracial adoptee and over the age of eighteen. If you choose to participate, I will interview you about your experience, thoughts, and feelings about your racial identity in relation to your adoption. In addition, I will ask you to provide demographic information about yourself. The interview will be conducted in person or on the telephone, will be tape-recorded, and will last approximately forty-five minutes. I may also telephone you after the interview for the purposes of further clarification and/or elaboration if necessary.

The risk of participating is that some interview questions may trigger negative thoughts and feelings. You are advised to seek the support of friends, family, or a professional if you feel the need to process your experience. Attached is a list of local professionals who you may wish to contact for counseling or support.

The benefits of participating in this study are that you have the opportunity to contribute to an important area of research and to enlighten social workers that will be working with transracial adoptees and their families. Unfortunately, I am not able to offer financial compensation.

Your participation in this study is confidential and any material received from you will be disguised. I will label audio tapes and interview notes with a pseudonym. In addition, I will keep consent forms, audio tapes, and interview notes in a locked location during the study and for three years thereafter in accordance with federal regulations. At that time, I will either maintain the material in its secure location or destroy it. In my thesis, I will not use demographic information to describe each individual; rather I will combine the data to reflect the pool in a cumulative way.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any interview question(s), and you may withdraw from the study up to March 31, 2007. If you do withdraw before that date, all of your collected information will then be destroyed.

**YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.**

**Signature of Participant** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

If you have any further questions about this study, participation, rights of participants, or this consent form, please feel free to ask me at the contact information below.

Thank you for your time, and I greatly look forward to having you as a participant in my study.

Sincerely,

Kristen D. McCully

48 Sanderson Street

Greenfield, MA 01301

kmccully@email.smith.edu

## APPENDIX E

### INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Current age:
2. Age at adoption:
3. Gender:
4. Occupation:
5. Do you have any children?  
\_\_Yes  
\_\_No
6. How do you define transracial adoption?
7. What is your understanding of why your parent(s) adopted transracially?
8. Please describe the family in which you grew up.
9. In what ways, if at all, did your parents recognize your ethnicity/race?
10. How, if at all, would you say that race/ethnicity fit into how you identify yourself? How do you identify yourself?
11. How, if at all, did your parents help facilitate your racial identity development?
12. Do you think racism has influenced your identity development? If so, how? If not, can you elaborate?
13. Did you feel that your parent(s) prepared you to deal with racism? Can you give an example?
14. Would you say the neighborhood/community you were up in was diverse in terms of race and/or ethnicity? How so?
15. How would you describe the type of neighborhood in which you currently live?
16. If you were to give advice to people who want to adopt transracially, what would that be and why?