

Child Welfare and Transracial Adoption

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Child welfare is one of the most critical issues currently facing African American families. Elevated levels of single-parent female-headed households and high rates of general and childhood poverty, combined with substance abuse and criminal incarceration, has led to the placement of significant numbers of Black children in foster care. It is important to note that the number of Black children in the child welfare system would be much higher if it were not for grandparents, extended family members, and other members of the informal adoption network of Black Americans (Hill, 1977; Taylor, Chatters, Tucker, & Lewis, 1990).

Black children are much more likely to be in foster care than White children, remain in foster care for longer periods, and consequently, are more likely to undergo multiple placements (Taylor et al., 1990). Due to the developmental risks associated with long-term residence in foster care, several strategies have been employed to reduce the number of children in the child welfare system. Transracial adoption is one of the most controversial methods to improve the welfare of Black children. The actual number of

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transracial adoptions is very low; 1% of all adoptions in 1987 were transracial adoptions (Griffiths, 1995; Stolley, 1993).

The article by Alexander and Curtis provides an excellent review of the literature on the impact of transracial adoption on African American children. This article does a good job of discussing some of the policy issues and methodological limitations of research on transracial adoption. Due to page limitations only a select number of issues can be covered in this review. In this reaction piece we plan to address several issues that are associated with transracial adoption.

PERSONAL SELF-ESTEEM AND GROUP IDENTITY

The evidence cited by Alexander and Curtis is overwhelming in one regard; when looking at personal self-esteem, adopted and nonadopted children do not differ. However, less clear is the nature of group identity among adopted and nonadopted children. Group identity is rarely examined in the adoption studies cited by Alexander and Curtis. When it is, the findings suggest that group identification is problematic (McRoy, Lauderdale, Zurcher, 1982).

Group identity is a bond with an ethnic/racial group whose members are perceived by themselves and others to have a common origin and culture, and shared activities in which the common origin or culture is an essential ingredient. Personal self-esteem, on the other hand, refers to how one evaluates the overall self, regardless of racial/ethnic group. Group identity and personal self-esteem are not the same phenomenon. Thus one might possess strong personal self-esteem, but have weak ties to the group (Porter & Washington, 1993).

When examining group identity, several adoption studies rely on doll study methodology that has been severely criticized. This methodology, at best, measures the group/racial label chosen by the child or his or her ability to correctly identify which group society expects him or her to fit into. Phinney's (1990) review of the literature on ethnic identity argues that the self-labeling process identified in doll studies is only one of several types of measures of group identification. Others include a sense of belonging, positive and negative attitudes toward the group, ethnic involvement (social participation and cultural practices), as well as language, friendship, religion, clubs, organizations, political ideology, and area of residence. In sum, adoption research is inadequate with respect to the examination of group identity.

WHITE PARENTS AS SOCIALIZING AGENTS FOR BLACK CHILDREN

Clearly, one of the most complicated and contentious areas in transracial adoption concerns issues of identity development. Reservations about transracial adoption voiced by many Black practitioners, social workers, psychologists, and other social scientists center on concerns about the development of a positive racial identity among Black children. The task of socializing Black children involves at least two dimensions. In addition to routine socialization experiences and practices (e.g., moral behavior, self-care, and independence), parents also must provide Black children with a set of skills and knowledge to counter the impact of racial prejudice and discrimination and develop a healthy sense of self as a person of color.

Adoptive families, especially those that are middle class, are capable of doing a good job in establishing a strong sense of personal self-esteem in their adoptive children. The larger question that critics of transracial adoptions raise is whether White parents can inculcate strong group identities in Black children. This society makes the socialization of children the primary responsibility of families. For parents, the general goal of the socialization process is to make children cognizant of statuses, social roles, and prescribed behavior. Additionally, part of this process should be to prepare them to recognize their position within the larger social structure. For parents of Black children, this process occurs within a wider social environment that is frequently incompatible with realizing a positive group identity. In this milieu, parents must act as a buffer between their offspring and society (Peters & Massey, 1983) and must function as both a filter of societal information and as a primary interpreter of the social structure.

It is within the family context that the individual first becomes aware of and begins to grapple with the significance of racism and discrimination (Alejandro-Wright, 1985; Washington, 1976). The intrafamilial socialization of group *and* personal identity has considerable bearing upon personal functioning in a society that cultivates negative conceptions of minority group members through direct interaction, the media, and institutional barriers (Allen & Hatchett, 1986).

As with all socialization practices, these processes are ongoing and are modified over time in accordance with the development and maturational status of the child. Further, for Black children, general socialization practices and more specific race socialization practices are interrelated. For example, the concept of race and race prejudice is crucial for understanding the moral dilemmas of the historical event of slavery, as well as contemporary racial discrimination (e.g., housing discrimination). Race issues, whether on an

individual or societal level, become the context within which Black children begin to interpret and understand a wide range of individual and group behaviors. On an individual level, Black children have to learn how to negotiate an environment in which the valued physical aesthetic is based on Caucasian standards (e.g., skin color, hair texture, body physique) that are dissimilar from their own. Children develop a sense of their physical selves at an early age. As recent studies indicate, elementary school girls report distorted body image and will undergo dieting in an attempt to attain "ideal" body weight. Coupled with high rates of disordered body image and eating disorders among adolescents (and attendant problems of self-esteem and self-acceptance), it is clear that cultural messages about desirable and preferred physical traits are pervasive and powerful. A Black cultural aesthetic, operating within family and community settings that values African physical traits, represents an important counterbalancing force.

Proponents of transracial adoption fail to understand that the continuing processes of racial socialization are not trivial concerns. Simply put, the racial socialization of Black children represents an enormous challenge even for Black parents. Moreover, despite its importance to issues of identity development, there is little systematic evidence about how even Black families buffer and insulate their children to foster a functional group and personal identity (Bowman & Howard, 1985; Jackson, McCullough, & Gurin, 1988; Peters, 1985; Spencer, 1985; Thornton, Chatters, Taylor, & Allen, 1990). Black parents who do not or are ill-equipped to instill a positive group identity in their children during the socialization process are described as people at risk and their children as manifesting problems of racial dissonance (e.g., Ogbu, 1983).

Anecdotally, there are cases of individuals who have been unable to successfully negotiate their social environments because of their low levels of racial identity. However, the truth of the matter is that we do not have solid empirical research addressing these issues. For example, we do not know how and under what circumstances Black Americans are socialized to race concerns. We know relatively little about other dimensions of racial socialization such as beliefs and attitudes and group identification. We do not know at what point Black children develop specific feelings (e.g., pride, shame) about being Black nor how and when children learn to cope with racial adversity (e.g., verbal and physical confrontations, social rejection, negative race images).

Not surprisingly, we know little about how White parents of Black children may approach these tasks. Many Black professionals are rightly concerned about the capacities and abilities of White parents to successfully raise a Black child with a positive and healthy identity. These concerns are

particularly urgent given that White parents, by virtue of their privileged racial status, may consciously or unconsciously reject a view of American culture as being racially stratified. Even given an awareness of these concerns, White parents may possess only a limited understanding of the dynamics and consequences of race in American society.

RACIAL SOCIALIZATION ACROSS THE LIFESPAN

Much of the literature reveals a tendency to consider socialization as a process occurring in childhood and implemented exclusively by parents. Although we tend to think of socialization as a childhood experience, it is an ongoing process occurring across the lifespan in accordance with the cognitive and emotional maturity of the individual. Racial socialization, in particular, is coordinated to age and maturational status because intergroup interactions and racial sanctions are ordered along these lines. Cross-racial interactions involving young children may be accepted, while those involving adolescents may be prohibited. We know very little about the roles that parents, extended kin, and peers play in these aspects of racial socialization. As this example implies, peer groups that are based in church, community, and school settings are an important source of information about racial socialization. Adolescence, with its emphasis on peer relations and defining self and group identity, is a particularly important phase in which to examine these issues.

Finally, we have virtually no information about how major adult roles (i.e., worker, parent) relate to racial socialization. We do not know to what extent racial stratification in the workforce and outright workplace discrimination form the basis of racial socialization information that is passed on to children. It may be the case that becoming a parent is a pivotal event for defining oneself, perhaps in new ways, as an African American.

RACIAL IDENTITY AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Many Black practitioners believe that Black children and adults who have not established a strong racial identity may have difficulty in coping with prejudice and discrimination. Persons without a strong racial group identity may internalize racist and discriminatory behavior directed toward them.

This may result in a variety of negative outcomes such as higher levels of psychological distress (Neighbors, Jackson, Broman, & Thompson, *in press*). Several authors have argued that a system-blame perspective is ego protective because it allows African Americans to avoid the painful psychological effects of self-blame (Hillman, Wood, & Sawilowsky, 1992; McCarthy & Yancey, 1971; Neighbors et al., *in press*; Veroff, Douvan, & Kulka, 1981). Further, individuals with lower levels of group identity may become marginalized and isolated. That is, they voluntarily reject their Black peers and institutions, while never experiencing total acceptance by their White peers.

We know that racial group identity has both positive and negative aspects. Positive aspects are reflected in affirmations of Black culture and Black pride. Negative aspects of racial group identity reflect the acceptance of negative stereotypes about Blacks. Clearly, racial socialization and racial group identity are complex and multidimensional constructs. At this point, we are only beginning to develop adequate measures of these constructs and it may be that racial socialization and group identity are too complex and uniquely individual to assess by a survey instrument. Similarly, the relationship between racial group identification and indicators of personal functioning (e.g., self-esteem, locus of control, psychological distress, depression) is not simplistic, direct, or obvious (Neighbors et al., *in press*). Consequently, researchers investigating the impact of transracial adoption on Black children need to understand the inherent difficulties in measurement, as well as the complexities of the underlying conceptual issues and linkages.

PRACTICAL ALTERNATIVES

The foregoing comments underscore the importance of refining the concepts of personal self-esteem and racial identity and their relationship to racial socialization efforts in various forms. From a practice standpoint, however, we would do well to remember that transracial adoption is one of several mechanisms whereby entrance into the child welfare system can be reduced.

One mechanism, family preservation services, focuses on preventing children from being removed from their families. These programs provide intensive services to families where a child is at risk of being removed from its biological parents or provide services to assist a parent in resuming custody of a child who is currently in foster care (see Lindsey, 1994 for a review of family preservation programs and child welfare programs in general). Family preservation programs have received a great deal of atten-

tion from both conservative and liberal policy makers because of their intuitive appeal and their cost-effectiveness in comparison to foster care and orphanages. Recent high-quality evaluation research on various family preservation programs, however, have not found them to be particularly effective in substantially reducing the placement of children (Lindsey, 1994).

African American grandparents often play an active and central role in the raising of their grandchildren, due to circumstances such as unemployment, physical and mental incapacity, homelessness, substance abuse, and adolescent parenting. In some instances, Black grandparents function in a primary caretaking role and become surrogate parents, assuming formal custody of their grandchildren (Apfel & Seitz, 1991; Burton, 1992; Minkler, Roe, & Price, 1992). Research in child welfare tends to ignore the role of grandparents as surrogate parents and consequently fails to discuss the types of services that grandparents need to buttress their raising of grandchildren. Services such as (a) respite care from parenting responsibilities; (b) educational interventions focusing on parenting skills, childhood development, and childhood diseases and immunizations; (c) legal assistance that addresses issues of guardianship and foster care; and (d) financial guidance and assistance are the types of services needed by grandparents to assist their parenting of grandchildren (Burton, 1992).

Family preservation and programs directed toward grandparents functioning as surrogate parents are useful methods for maintaining children within their extended families. In addition, there are a number of changes that adoption agencies can make to improve the adoption rate of Black children. One obvious recommendation is to hire Black social workers and support staff to help ensure good relationships with the agency and potential Black adoptive parents. Agencies may have to reevaluate their guidelines for perspective parents to fit the current socioeconomic reality of Black adults. Single-parent adoptions should receive greater attention as a means of reducing the number of Black children in the child welfare system. Finally, subsidized adoptions are another means that would help agencies increase the pool of eligible Black adoptive parents.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The article by Alexander and Curtis is both provocative and timely, and appropriately focuses our attention on the state of knowledge about the long-term consequences of transracial adoptions. At this point, we have too

little information to understand the role White parents play in preparing their Black children to function in a world that is often hostile to their existence. If they ignore the racial component to the socialization process, these White parents may bring up adults who overall feel good about themselves, but may have important adjustment problems nonetheless. These issues revolve around an ambiguity that comes from having little preparation in what it means to be Black in America. Clearly, being adopted is better than staying in foster care all one's childhood. Nonetheless, it is not as simple to say that it makes little difference whether the adoptive parent is Black or White when the child is Black. Alexander and Curtis challenge Black constituencies to provide proof to contradict the extant literature on transracial adoption. Although we agree that such work is necessary, we caution that published work has not considered race *per se* as an important aspect of Black children's lives because issues of group identity have been ignored or oversimplified (e.g., Bartholet, 1991). In so doing, this work leaves us with an ambiguity about the role White parents play in a significant aspect of their adoptive children's lives.

This essay has attempted to buttress the review of Alexander and Curtis by placing transracial adoption in the broader child welfare context. We have noted the concern that Black professionals have regarding racial identity among Black children who are raised in Black households. Accordingly, concerns about Black children raised in White households are imperative. We also discussed several programs that have been established to reduce the number of Black children in the child welfare system by buttressing families or expanding the pool of Black adoptive parents. Much of the criticism that adoption agencies received from Black social workers derived from the impression that agency policy endorsed transracial adoption over efforts to place Black children with Black parents.

In closing, it is important to note that all of the discussed alternatives are much better for Black children than placement in the foster care system. A number of studies demonstrate that the foster care system produces adults who are socially isolated, have low levels of education, high levels of unemployment, and are overrepresented in the homeless population (Lindsey, 1994; Sosin, Piliavin, & Westerfelt, 1991). Ultimately, the welfare of Black children will be advanced by a thorough understanding of the dynamics and consequences of transracial adoption, more aggressive and innovative strategies to enlarge the pool of Black prospective parents, and a full exploration of other alternatives to foster care (e.g., family preservation, surrogate parenting).

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