

## ***Adoptee Dissimilarity from the Adoptive Family: Clinical Practice and Research Implications***

**Leslie Doty Hollingsworth, Ph.D.**

**ABSTRACT:** A review of theoretical, clinical, and empirical literature was conducted regarding the effect of adoptee dissimilarity from the adoptive family. There is empirical evidence of a relationship between dissimilarity and searching for birth parents, satisfaction with the adoption, and adjustment. A theory of an effect of identity-seeking on searching by adoptees has also been formulated. It is suggested, therefore, that an effort to establish one's identity may mediate a relationship between adoptee dissimilarity and searching. Implications are presented for social work practice and research, and for public policy and education, in instances of same race and transracial adoption.

In examining the experience of adopted children, the question of being or feeling different from the adoptive family arises. In the adoption literature this is referred to as "dissimilarity". Interest in the effect of dissimilarity, while not recent, is renewed by the controversy concerning whether transracial adoption should occur. Because of the differences in physical features which are characteristic of most transracial adoptions, questions regarding the effect of dissimilarity are of special interest. At the same time, there has not been sufficient research to yield answers to these questions. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to review general adoption literature which contains theoretical formulations, empirical findings, and clinical case materials regarding dissimilarity. *Theoretical formulations* refer here to the systematic organization of ideas in order to understand a particu-

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Leslie Doty Hollingsworth is Assistant Professor at The University of Michigan School of Social Work. Address communications to Leslie Doty Hollingsworth, Ph.D., 1080 South University, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109-1106; e-mail: lholling@umich.edu.

lar phenomenon. In this paper, examples of theoretical formulations are adoptee identity development and genealogical bewilderment. *Empirical findings* refer to the results of tests of theoretical formulations. Examples are results of tests of a relationship between dissimilarity and searching, between dissimilarity and satisfaction with the adoption, and between dissimilarity and adjustment. Finally, *clinical case* materials contain narratives of the experiences of clients in psychotherapy which inform the phenomenon in question. The aim of the review is (1) to determine whether the literature contains evidence of a relationship between adoptee dissimilarity and adoption outcomes in same race adoptions, and (2) to offer the findings of the review for use in guiding clinical practice and research with transracial adoptees.

In the United States, transracial adoption typically refers to the adoption of children of color by Caucasian parents. Opponents such as the National Association of Black Social Workers ("Preserving African-American families", 1994) have consistently raised concerns about the potential for racial and ethnic identity development in children who are transracially adopted. Thus, adoptee dissimilarity is an important area of study. The current paper examines the following questions with regard to same race and transracial adoptions: (1) Is there evidence of a relationship between adoptee dissimilarity and the outcomes of the adoption? (2) If so, in what aspects of adoption outcomes does the relationship occur? (3) Are other variables present which influence the relationship between dissimilarity and outcomes?

### **Literature Review**

Literature was reviewed which contained theoretical, clinical, and empirical work pertaining to adoptee dissimilarity. This literature seems to fall into four categories: (1) identity development; (2) searching for birth families; (3) satisfaction with the adoption; and (4) overall adjustment. Literature in each category will be presented.

#### *Identity Development*

The topic of identity is associated with the largest number of works, albeit theoretical, in the dissimilarity literature. From a philosophical perspective (Heidegger, 1969), identity is said to encompass three elements: uniqueness or sameness with the self; differentiation from

others; and a sense of belonging with others who share some common characteristic(s). Other theorists have advanced similar conceptualizations. For example, Erikson (1959) defined mature identity as reaching an acceptance of, and comfort with, oneself. The individual builds on successfully completed prior tasks, allowing a sense of direction and an ability to make decisions. According to Marcia (1966), an individual has developed an identity when he or she has been confronted with the crisis of questioning the values of associates and has emerged with a commitment to an independently formed solution. Finally, Offer (1969) suggests that identity exists when an individual is able to perceive and report self-feelings. Offer, Ostrov and Howard (1981) say this occurs in the context of learning to get along with others and acquiring a sense of autonomy.

Identity development is believed to take its primary form in adolescence. However, Grotevant (1997) sees it as developing throughout adolescence and adulthood but coinciding with periods of exploration and self-evaluation. Abend (1995) also describes identity development as culminating in young adulthood, though not entirely ceasing at that point.

The question of identity development is typically divided into two separate questions where transracial adoption is concerned. First, is the personal identity of transracial adoptees separate and distinct from an ethnic identity? Second, is it necessary for transracial adoptees to be identified with their ethnic group? While available empirical findings are not sufficient to answer these questions, a goal is to provide information which will inform further examination.

Several questions emerge which frame the discussion: (1) How does identity show up in adoptees? (2) What is the process of identity development among adoptees? (3) What roles do the adoptive family and the birth family play in this process? (4) In what way does dissimilarity affect adoptee identity?

*How does identity show up in adoptees?*

Identity is said to show up in the way people define themselves in a variety of contexts (Abend, 1974). This may have to do with the way one presents her or his ideas about professional, social, and sexual roles and preferences, one's political and religious ideologies and other unique values, and important personal interests and avocations (p. 620).

In adoptees, identity is characterized by the integration of one's adoptive status with the reality of one's other self-representations as described above (Grotevant, 1997). Grotevant recommends that

adoptees construct narratives which include their full history as adopted persons. These narratives provide a picture of the preferences, values, and interests which are a part of their identity overall and those that are related specifically to their adoptive status. The latter may include stories about the first realization of having been adopted, how the adoptee responded to that knowledge, and search, reunion, or other experiences with the birth family. For transracial adoptees such narratives may include the adoptee's first awareness that he or she was of a different color or had other physical features that were different from the adoptive family.

Grotevant (1997) points out that identity development "concerns the self, the historical and cultural contexts of the self, and change over time" (p. 4). This suggests that pre-adoptive history and the culture of origin are included in those realities with which the adoptee must come to terms. This is especially relevant for transracial adoptees. In fact, Grotevant considers it impossible for the issue of culture to be ignored in instances of transracial adoptee identity development since it is constantly raised in social interaction with others.

*What is the process of identity development in adoptees?*

Grotevant (1997) describes the development of identity in adoptees as a stagelike process. At the outset, the reality of the adoptee does not contain her or his adoptive status. This may be because of a lack of exposure to the information, but more likely it is because the adoptee is not at a point developmentally of incorporating the knowledge (LeVine & Sallee, 1990). Eventually, the adoptee encounters a disequilibrating crisis in which there is confrontation with the full meaning of the adoption. From this, the adoptee gradually moves toward "a more fully integrated identity that incorporates [the] adoptive status" (Grotevant, p. 16).

For adoptees who are not exposed to their birth parent(s), the disequilibrating experience may occur with the first realization of being adopted and of the existence of birth parents. Hodges, Berger, Melzak, Oldenschulte, Rabb, and Salo (1984) refer to this as a gap in identity. Adoptees may attempt to fill the gap by wishing for a mental representation of the birth parent(s) and may actually strive to create one. Lacking the necessary information, the adoptee may try to accomplish the same goal through fantasy. The inability to achieve this may lead to a crisis in identity development. Familiarity with the birth parents becomes the source of resolution.

For transracial adoptees, the process of identity development may involve additional steps. For instance, depending on the pre-adoptive experience, the adoptee may start off with a lack of integration of both adoptee identity and ethnic identity. Subsequent disequilibrating experiences may be directed at the individual as an adoptee and/or as a member of an ethnic minority group. The resulting integration of these experiences into a new identity must involve the resolution of both types of experiences. The process by which this integration takes place is still an area to be researched. However, one requirement may be for the adoptee to feel accepted by the ethnic and the transracial community and to feel a part of both.

*What roles do the adoptive family and the birth family play?*

Familiarity with the birth parent(s) and an opportunity to perceive similarities to them appear to facilitate identity development in adopted persons (Auth & Zaret, 1986; Hodges et al., 1984). Thus, one role of the adoptive parent(s) is to acknowledge, rather than deny, any dissimilarity and to provide the adoptee with information and support in becoming familiar with the birth family. Adults who search for their birth parents often withhold information about the search from their adoptive parents because the latter may feel threatened by the search (Gonyo & Watson, 1988; March, 1997; Pacheco & Eme, 1993; Sachdev, 1992). It is important that adoptive parents accept familiarity with the birth parents as necessary to the development of a healthy identity in their child. Correspondingly, the willingness of the birth parents to make themselves accessible through direct contact and/or by providing information about themselves (e.g., pictures, circumstances surrounding the adoption, and up to date records) are contributions which they may make. Grotevant (1997) points out that the adoptive parents and the birth parents may also be confronted with identity issues which they must come to terms with. The former are confronted with integrating into their identity the inability to give birth, and the latter with integrating the reality of having given birth to someone whom they do not parent.

Because identity development seems to require that transracial adoptees come to terms with their culture of origin (Grotevant, 1997), their adoptive parents must also become familiar with the child's culture. This may require them to participate in a culture that they do not feel a part of. Similarly, birth parents who maintain contact with their child, such as in open adoptions, must enter a culture to which

they do not belong and that they do not share with their child. These experiences may be difficult for both sets of parents.

*How does adoptee dissimilarity affect identity?*

As noted earlier, theorists have posited that individuals develop an identity through first experiencing a sense of oneness or sameness with the group, then discovering unique aspects of the self within this social context. The final step is believed to involve the pulling together of various aspects of the self into an integrated whole. Dissimilarity from the group at the outset brings in an additional element. While biological children may experience dissimilarity, a relative on one side or the other can usually be found whom the child resembles (Grotevant, 1997). This may not be the case for adopted children who may be confronted with the larger realization that they are not related biologically to any of the adoptive relatives. For children who are also not exposed to their birth parents, this may precipitate a desire to know them. Searching for birth parents may follow. Children who have no knowledge of their parents or only uncertain knowledge of them may experience what Sants (1964) referred to as "genealogical bewilderment" (p. 133). These children, often in adolescence, will begin to search for clues to the identity of their birth parent(s) as a mechanism for establishing their own identity. If unsuccessful, some of them attempt to develop mental representations (Hodges et al., 1984; Sherick, 1983; Stone, 1972). Case studies show that these attempts may require modification (Hodges et al., 1984); they may be derogatory (Sherick, 1983); or they may be unsuccessful altogether (Stone, 1972). However, most seem to involve positive images or fantasies (Bertocci & Schechter, cited in Schechter & Bertocci, 1990). As a part of their fantasies, some adoptees may also split off images of the good and bad parent, instead of integrating both good and bad images of each to form a realistic introject. Taking these in whole, they may internalize a self-image which alternates between inviting acceptance and inviting rejection. This may affect object relations later.

Where obvious racial or ethnic dissimilarity exists, adoptees may be confronted with identity dilemmas earlier in the life course, perhaps before they are prepared developmentally to deal with the crisis. Grotevant (1997) points out that for these adoptees, additional questions occur, such as "Who am I? Can I fit in? Where do I want to fit in? To which group do I have responsibility or allegiance? Must I choose or can I live in both worlds? Will society let this be my free choice (p. 9)? Even if transracially-adopted children grow up in an accepting com-

munity, they may be faced with such questions. These questions may arise during experiences such as dating interracially or moving to a region of the country where they are not so accepted racially (Grotevant, 1997).

### *Searching*

The second most frequently noted category is adoptee dissimilarity as a predictor of searching for birth parents. In almost every empirical work, a substantial proportion of searchers were motivated by a desire to know what the birth parent(s), especially the mother, looked like. Another interest was which of the birth family's traits were similar to those of the adoptee.

The motivation which propelled the 124 Canadian adoptees in a study by Sachdev (1992) to search for their birth parents was "their compelling need to attain a more cohesive identity" (p. 58). "By knowing that they belong to their genetic roots and that they look like someone related to them by blood, [the adoptees] hoped to experience the life they lost by separation" (pp. 58–59).

Motivated by interest in the effect of adoption on identity, Stein and Hoopes (1985) studied the search behavior of adolescents. Their sample consisted of 50 adopted and 41 nonadopted Caucasian high school students aged 15–18 years. All had been placed before age 24 months. Subjects were interviewed individually. Forty-four percent of searchers reported a perceived physical dissimilarity from their adoptive parents compared to 18% of non-searchers. Eighty-three percent of non-searchers perceived themselves as similar to their adoptive parents compared to 56% of searchers [ $X^2(1,50) = 2.62, p > .10 < .20$ ]. Thus, dissimilar adoptees engaged in searching for birth parents more frequently than those who were similar.

Among adoptees who were interested in searching for their birth parents, Stein and Hoopes (1985) quoted one 17-year-old as saying: "I'd want to know what she (the birth mother) looks like, where she's from and why she gave me up for adoption . . . to see if she looks anything like me. . . . If she did, it would be weird, but I'd be hoping she looked like me" (p. 57). Another 17-year-old is quoted as saying: "I only want to see if I look like my natural parents . . . if I did, then I'd want to see if I was like them in any other way. If it was good, I'd like it because then I'd hope to be like that when I got older, I'd also like to see if my interests matched theirs, to see if they were hereditary or environmental. I wonder how tall they were . . . I'd want to see their

kids to see if they would look like I did" (p. 57). There is also a tendency for adoptees to project a sameness onto the biological parent in either personality or appearance. For example, one 17-year-old male said "My [biological] parents would be tall (I'm a lot taller than most). . . . I think my dad would work a lot because that's all I ever do" (p. 60). Similarly, an 18-year-old male said: "Dad was probably big . . . I'm sure he played football . . . They'd be nice people, fun loving . . . Of course, these thoughts come from me . . . I'm like that (p. 60). Still another adolescent male offered the following: "They'd be outgoing like me. . . . Pretty reasonable and fair with regard to decisions, pretty athletic, liking to be on the go a lot. . . . I think and act differently from my [adoptive] parents now so I attribute this to my natural parents" (p. 60).

Interest in the personal characteristics of birth parents is consistent among the majority of adoptees studied: Kowal and Schilling (1985) surveyed 100 adoptees regarding factors which were associated with searches for the birth parents. Of the types of information adoptees said they would want from the agency through which they were adopted, 71% involved a desire to know about personality characteristics and 68% involved a desire for a physical description of the parents. Adoptees voiced wanting to know who they (the adoptees) looked like or who their children resembled. Said one adoptee "I need to justify who I am because I'm very different from my [adoptive] family and I never felt like I was OK for who I am" (p. 361).

What is there about birth parents' actual characteristics that adoptees are interested in? Triseliotis (1973) conducted face-to-face interviews with 70 adult adoptees who contacted a government agency for their birth records. Among the motivations they examined were: (1) a desire to know what their parents looked like, such as their height, hair color, and eye color; (2) a wish to be able to form a mental picture of the birth parent(s); (3) a wish to know who the adoptee is like and who the adoptee's children resemble; (4) a desire to compare the adoptee's own image with that of someone else; (5) a wish to describe oneself as looking like or 'taking after' another person; and (6) a desire to understand contradictory physical characteristics.

Discovering similarity to someone seems to be an important element in outcomes of reunions with birth parents. Of respondents studied by Bertocci and Schechter (cited in Schechter & Bertocci, 1990) who reported post-search changes to their lives, the second largest group spoke of having found someone whom one was like and

whom one was a relative to. This was in addition to the positive changes which occurred in body-image and self-perception. (The largest group found changes in "self-esteem, self-confidence, and assertiveness.")

Although support for the existence of a relationship between dissimilarity and searching is found, one study (Sobol & Cardiff, 1983) did not confirm these findings. Here, 60 adult adoptees completed self-reports on a number of variables. While the success of the adoption was negatively related to searching involvement, the degree of perceived similarity between the adoptive parent and the adoptee (based either on physical resemblance or personality) was not related to searching. (What is not known is whether an association existed between dissimilarity and the success of the adoption, which was then negatively associated with searching.)

In their study of transracial adoptee dissimilarity and outcomes, Feigelman and Silverman (1983) reported the results from a survey of 737 families. The families were Caucasian parents who had adopted African American, Korean, Vietnamese, Colombian, and other ethnic group children. Of the original adopters, 372 participated in follow-up interviews in 1980 and 1981. Thirty-five percent of the adoptees who were reported by their parents as having searched for their birth parents were also reported to have been uncomfortable with their appearance. This was compared with 21% of non-searchers. (The number of actual searchers may have been higher since some adoptees withhold searching information from their adoptive families.)

In summary, there is evidence in empirical literature of a relationship between adoptee dissimilarity and searching for birth parents. This is true for same race and for transracial adoptees. However, it has been proposed that while there is evidence that adoptee dissimilarity may stimulate searching, it appears to be the effort to develop a personal identity, through familiarity and identification with the birth family, that motivates searching. This is reflected in the following conclusion by Stein and Hoopes (1985): "Thus, mismatch issues seem to increase the likelihood of search behavior, at least as regards a perceived discrepancy in physical appearance. This seems understandable in light of the adolescent's identification needs in the process of establishing an identity. The presence of role models that are too divergent might impel the adolescent toward the fantasied biological parent who offers the hope of a likeness that would allow for more comfortable identification" (p. 64).

*Satisfaction with the Adoption*

The third category addresses a possible association between dissimilarity and satisfaction with the adoption. Raynor (1980) compared the adoption outcomes of adults who were initially in the foster care of their adoptive parent(s) with the outcomes of adults who were adopted directly. One hundred sixty families were interviewed. Fifty-two percent were from the original fostering group and 48% had been direct adoptions. Adoptive parents, adult adoptees (ages 22–27 years) and agency records were studied. The question of interest was how adoptees and their adoptive parents felt the adoption had “turned out”. Satisfaction was defined as having adoption-related expectations, needs, or desires met, being content with the adoption, or accepting it as adequate (p. 33). It was measured by what the adopters said and by the way they said it, although no more specific information than that was given. Adoptees’ satisfaction was significantly associated with their perceived similarity to the adoptive family. Similarity was measured by whether the adoptee felt very much like, somewhat like, or unlike the adoptive family, or he or she was uncertain, or the information was not covered. Ninety-seven percent ( $n = 37$ ) of adoptees who perceived themselves as very much like the adoptive family reported satisfaction with their experience of growing up adopted. In contrast, among adoptees who felt unlike their adoptive families or uncertain about any similarity, only 52 percent ( $n = 15$ ) reported satisfaction and 48% ( $n = 14$ ) perceived the adoption experience as unsatisfactory.

Interestingly, adoptive parents’ satisfaction with the adoption was also linked to the similarity that they perceived between the adoptee and themselves. For them, similarity was defined in terms of appearance, general intelligence, temperament, mannerisms, talents or skills. Ninety-seven percent ( $n = 94$ ) of the adoptive parents who perceived the adopted child as like themselves reported satisfaction with the overall adoption experience. However, among those who perceived the adoptee as unlike themselves, only 62% ( $n = 33$ ) reported satisfaction and 36% ( $n = 19$ ) reported an unsatisfactory overall experience with the adoptee. The researcher noted that adoptive parents perceived an adoptee as similar to themselves and were satisfied when the adoptee’s behavior was desirable. The adoptee was considered dissimilar and the adoption less satisfying when the behavior was undesirable. Thus, a relationship is suggested between perceived similarity of the adoptee and the adoptive family and satisfaction

with the adoption by both. Outcomes were not distinguished by race or ethnicity.

### *Adjustment*

Only one study addressed the relationship between dissimilarity and adjustment. It is also the only study in which the sample was made up of transracial adoptions and in which data included adoptee discomfort with appearance. As reported earlier, Feigelman and Silverman (1983) compared the adjustment levels of African American, Korean, and Colombian transracial adoptees with their discomfort with their physical appearance. To measure adjustment, adoptive parents were asked to describe their child's difficulties in emotional adjustment, growth, and other unspecified ways. They then rated the first child's behavior on a four-point scale indicating whether the child had never, rarely, sometimes, or often had difficulties in behavior. The child's overall adjustment was rated on the same type of scale (p. 70). Finally, parents were asked "how much time had elapsed before the child became 'their own' (entitlement) and whether they would recommend adoption to others" (p. 70). The researchers constructed a scale from the responses. This scale was used as a dependent variable to test the influence of other variables such as age, age at adoption, response of parents' family, friends, and neighbors to the adoption, stress of parents, and race-related variables such as comfort with appearance, racial pride, and the ethnic composition of the community in which they lived. A multiple regression analysis was conducted, using these as independent variables and the adjustment scale as the dependent variable, African American children were generally pre-adolescent to adolescent in age; Colombian children were described as almost all under 12 years old, and Korean children tended to be adolescents.

Sixty percent of "well-adjusted" transracially adopted African Americans never experienced any discomfort about their appearance whereas only 22% of those rated as "poorly adjusted" never experienced discomfort. There were further differences between those with light (fair) complexions and those with dark complexions. Thirty-six percent of fair-complexioned adoptees were free of adjustment problems compared to 16% of dark-complexioned adoptees.

Twenty-eight percent of Korean adolescents (and 26% of Korean adoptees of all ages) were sometimes or frequently uncomfortable with their appearance. This was compared to 16% of Caucasian adoptees and 11% of Colombian adoptees. Among the adoptees of Ko-

rean origin, 53% of those who were reported to be uncomfortable with their appearance had moderate to serious adjustment problems, compared with 16% of those who had no such discomfort. (The highest percentage of children and adolescents of all of the cultural groups who were described as uncomfortable with their appearance were African Americans, at 38%).

Multiple regression analysis produced additional variables which were associated with adjustment. For African Americans, in addition to comfort with their appearance, adjustment was influenced by age at adoption, age at the time of the study, opposition of extended adoptive family, friends, and neighbors, and skin tone (i.e., lighter versus darker color). Those variables which maintained a significant effect between 1975 and 1981 were: the extent of the earlier maladjustment and opposition of family members, friends, and neighbors.

Colombian children had the highest levels of adjustment of all of the transracial adoptees, only one percent less than parent descriptions of the adjustment of U. S. Caucasian children. This was attributed primarily to the fact that these adoptees were, for the most part, younger than their counterparts at the time of their adoption. Colombian children also had the lowest percentages of discomfort with their appearance, lower even than that of Caucasian children. Researchers noted that Colombian children tended to be treated as Caucasian by their transracial adopters, leading to low identification with the ethnic group. However, the Colombian children were too young to determine whether this would have an effect on later adjustment.

Finally, in addition to the effect of attitude toward one's appearance, adjustment among Korean children and adolescents was influenced by age at placement, age at the time of the study, pre-adoptive history (experiences), fertility of the adoptive parents, and the attitude of the extended family, friends, and neighbors toward the adoption.

In summary, for transracial adoptees, adjustment appears to be associated with attitude toward their appearance. The extent of that association differs by racial or ethnic group. Other variables are also influential, indicating that this an area for additional research.

## **Discussion**

Literature was reviewed which explored a possible link between adoptee dissimilarity and adoption outcomes. Three research questions were addressed: (1) Is there evidence of a relationship between adoptee dissimilarity and adoption outcomes? (2) In what aspects of

adoption outcomes does such a relationship occur? (3) Are any other factors identified which may influence adoption outcomes when adoptee dissimilarity is also present?

Empirical literature consistently indicated a relationship between dissimilarity and searching as well as a relationship between dissimilarity and satisfaction with the adoption, and dissimilarity and adjustment. (Only one study each was contained in the latter two circumstances and where dissimilarity and adjustment were linked, other variables also appeared influential.) At least one discussion in the literature suggests that the relationship of dissimilarity to searching is actually stimulated by a desire to establish one's personal identity. Thus, personal identity seeking may be a mediator of the relationship between dissimilarity and searching.

There are several implications for social work practice and research, and for policy and education. First, it is noted that familiarity with the birth family and perception of similarities to them are important for the development of a psychologically healthy personal identity in the adoptee. If this is supported empirically, important elements in adoption will include providing the adoptee with thorough information about his or her history, facilitating familiarity with the birth parents, and doing so throughout the life course. This provides support for policies which facilitate openness in adoption. As more research is done in this area, it will be interesting to assess whether adoptions in which adoptees are exposed to their birth families throughout the life course make a difference in identity development generally, and in transracial adoptions in particular. Berry (1991) found that children in adoptive families where post-placement contacts with birth parents occurred had better scores on a behavior rating scale than those without contacts. This direction also suggests that where the adoption is not an open one, social workers who are preparing prospective parents for adoption may find it useful to encourage an atmosphere of familiarity with the birth family. This may include pictures and other visual records as well as supporting the adoptee's interest in search and/or reunion with the birth parents. Information may be helpful which informs adoptive parents about the potential benefits to their children of familiarity with the birth family, and about anticipating their own (adoptive parents') feelings in this process. Clinical social work intervention with adoptive parents to help them in dealing with these feelings may be useful. Intervention may also be called for to assist adoptive parents in honoring individual uniqueness while maintaining a cohesive adoptive family unit. Finally, research will be useful which studies the effect of open adop-

tion on adoptee's and adoptive parent(s) satisfaction with the adoption, and on adoptee adjustment.

Second, a goal of this review was to identify findings which could inform transracial adoption research. Much of the dissimilarity research has been conducted with same race adoptees. These results indicate that the awareness of dissimilarity inspires in the adoptee a desire to complete the formation of a personal identity. Identity development must be considered within the adoptee's historical and cultural context. Given the reality of the physical dissimilarity of transracial adoptees, it is expected that seeking for identity should occur within the context of the racial or ethnic group with which others would identify the adoptee. This suggests that social workers should encourage the development of ethnic identification as a goal in practice with transracial adoptees and their families. Moreover, because physical dissimilarity would be expected to be evident very early in transracial adoptions, these adoptees may be motivated to search earlier in the life course. In her study of 1,268 California adoptive families, Berry (1991) reported that initiation of in-person visits with the birth family was significantly more likely among transracial adopters than same race adopters. Since searching necessarily involves persons of the adoptee's ethnic group, interest in one's ethnic identity may automatically follow. Further research is needed in this area as it relates to transracial adoptees.

Third, given the importance attached to familiarity with the birth parents, social work research should be directed to instances in which the adoptee became available for adoption as a result of the involuntary termination of the parental rights of the birth parents. Can these parents be expected to become cooperative participants in a system that they did not willingly enter? Berry (1991) found that almost half (48%) of California agency adopters had not met the adoptee's birth parent and 60% had not had post-placement contact. In contrast, only 13% of independent adopters had not met the birth parents and only 22% had had no post-placement contact. Agency adoptions are more likely to be products of the involuntary termination of parental rights. What effect does this reality have on the adoption triangle (Sorosky, Baran, & Pannor, 1984)? What is the relationship between adoptive parents and birth parents in an open adoption? Does this relationship differ when the adoption has been involuntary on the part of the birth parents? What message does the adoptee receive about the person of the birth parent(s)? Is there an association between the message that the adoptee receives and her or his attitudes regarding respect, loy-

ality and the perception of the good versus the bad parent? How does the social work practitioner discover what is in the best interests of all concerned?

Fourth, consideration must be given to the influence of variables other than, or in addition to, dissimilarity on outcomes. This is particularly of interest where variables in addition to dissimilarity were associated with adjustment for some transracial adoptees.

Fifth, study is needed of those adoptions in which dissimilarity does not have some of the effects noted in this review—that is, of dissatisfaction with the adoption, or of adjustment difficulties. What is unique about these families and how can social work practitioners make use of the knowledge of what works for them? Do areas of dissimilarity exist which are additional to physical and personality features? How are their outcomes similar or different? What are the experiences of adoptees who perceive satisfactory similarities with the birth family? Do the relationships between dissimilarity and adoption outcomes which have been noted in this review depend on the presence of other circumstances? What is the effect of biracial status?

Finally, the results noted in this review have specific implications for social work education. It may be that persons preparing for social work practice should be oriented as to when and how open adoptions should be facilitated. Learning how to do so in a way which addresses the needs of adoptees, birth parents and adoptive parents is an important part of this process. Social work education may also provide an opportunity for practitioners to identify their own values where transracial adoption is concerned. Exposure to the role of culture in children's development of a healthy personal identity may be included. The last decade has seen a surge in public policies at the federal level which are associated with adoption, and with transracial adoption specifically. Given the interplay between policy, research, and practice, careful attention should be given to the findings and conceptualizations of this paper as they have implications for future adoption policy and advocacy.

In summary, relevant literature suggests that adoptee dissimilarity stimulates a latent desire for a sense of personal identity which then motivates searching. Adoptee dissimilarity has also been negatively linked to satisfaction with the adoption and to adjustment, although the influence of some other potentially moderating variables is as yet unclear. These findings add to knowledge of the implications of adoptee dissimilarity for adoptive parent training, open adoption poli-

cies, and other areas of social work practice and research, as well as education and public policy regarding transracial adoption.

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