

California Social Work Education Center

C A L S W E C

**ENHANCING POSITIVE OUTCOMES IN
TRANSRACIAL ADOPTIVE FAMILIES**

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2004

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CALSWEC PREFACE

The California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC) is the nation's largest state coalition of social work educators and practitioners. It is a consortium of the state's 20 accredited graduate schools of social work, the 58 county departments of social services and mental health, the California Department of Social Services, and the California Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers.

The primary purpose of CalSWEC is an educational one. Our central task is to provide specialized education and training for social workers that practice in the field of public child welfare. Our stated mission, in part, is "to facilitate the integration of education and practice." But this is not our ultimate goal. Our ultimate goal is to improve the lives of children and families who are the users and the purpose of the child welfare system. By educating others and ourselves, we intend a positive result for children: safety, a permanent home, and the opportunity to fulfill their developmental promise.

To achieve this challenging goal, the education and practice related activities of CalSWEC are varied: recruitment of a diverse group of social workers, defining a continuum of education and training, engaging in research and evaluation of best practices, advocating for responsive social policy, and exploring other avenues to accomplish the CalSWEC mission. Education is a process, and necessarily an ongoing one involving interaction with a changing world. One who hopes to practice successfully in any field does not become "educated" and then cease to observe and to learn.

To foster continuing learning and evidence-based practice within the child welfare field, CalSWEC funds a series of curriculum modules that employ applied

research methods to advance the knowledge of best practices in child welfare. These modules, on varied child welfare topics, are intended to enhance curriculum for Title IV-E graduate social work education programs and for continuing education of child welfare agency staff. To increase distribution and learning throughout the state, curriculum modules are made available through the CalSWEC Child Welfare Resource Library to all participating schools and collaborating agencies.

The module that follows has been commissioned with your learning in mind. We at CalSWEC hope it serves you well.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Devon Brooks, PhD, MSW, has been on the faculty of the School of Social Work at the University of Southern California since 1999. He obtained his MSW and PhD from the School of Social Welfare at the University of California at Berkeley. Dr. Brooks' research and practice interests include racial and ethnic disparities in the permanency and mental health outcomes of children and families served by public child welfare agencies, risk assessment, assessment of formal and indigenous service needs and utilization, adoption, transracial adoption and racial matching policy, gay and lesbian adoption and foster care placements, family preservation, and child welfare innovations. Currently, he is Principal Investigator on several studies examining the implementation and impact of concurrent planning and Structured Decision Making on child permanency and well-being. He served as Guest Editor for a special double issue

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Jennifer Reich, PhD, is a Fellow at the Institute for Health Policy Studies at the University of California, San Francisco. She received her MA and PhD in Sociology from the University of California, Davis in 2002. Dr. Reich's research uses qualitative methods to explore gender and race in families and state policy. She has written articles and book chapters on an array of subjects including expectations of parents in the child protective services system, multiracial families, and representations of poor families in the media. She is currently completing her book *Fixing Families: Parents, Power and the Child Welfare System*. Dr. Reich will begin as Assistant Professor of Sociology and Criminology at the University of Denver in Fall 2004.

Leslie H. Wind, PhD, ACSW, LMSW-ACP, is an Assistant Professor at the Boston College Graduate School of Social Work. She has been a professional social worker for 15 years. Since completion of her MSW at the University of California at Los Angeles, Dr. Wind has worked as a clinical social worker, administrator, and trainer in outpatient and inpatient settings and in for-profit, nonprofit, and private practice arenas. She has extensive postgraduate training in the field of trauma and has devoted most of her practice to child abuse survivors and their families. Following completion of her doctorate at the University of Southern California, Dr. Wind moved to Boston where she pursues teaching and research at Boston College.

ABSTRACT

This curriculum is designed to provide current, relevant, and sensitive information about the experiences and challenges of transracial adoptive families. The ultimate goal of the curriculum is to improve the quality of services and supports provided to these unique families. As more children of color, many of whom are older and have multiple special needs, are permanently placed with White parents, it is vital to understand these families' normative developmental challenges and experiences. Issues surrounding family development, race, and culture are of particular importance. There is also a growing subset of transracial adoptive families who choose to maintain contact with their child's birth family following the finalization of adoption. Very little information exists to help these families or their child welfare workers understand the bumpy terrain of openness, especially over time. This curriculum takes a first step toward filling some of the many gaps in knowledge and practice.

This curriculum contains summaries of the current literature on transracial adoption, a theoretical discussion about normative development in transracial adoptive families, practice-oriented information including discussion questions and exercises, case vignettes, worker guidance, and a self-assessment tool, and findings from the study conducted as part of this project. An in-depth qualitative study was conducted with 12 transracial adoptive families in California in order to explore and illuminate relevant themes. This allows for the extensive inclusion of the voices of the adult and youth participants themselves. Findings themes include: discussions of the complicated factors involved in choosing transracial adoption; how the children and youth

understand the meaning of their adoption; issues around the choice to maintain contact with their adopted child's birth family, including boundaries, hopes and expectations, the role of the contact, and the vulnerability of contact arrangements; the role of race in family life and development, including discussing race and ancestry, negotiating different cultural worlds, and developmental changes; and the role of services and supports prior to and following adoption, including the importance of both emotional and informational support.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this curriculum is to enhance positive development and permanency in transracial adoptive families through the teaching and training of child welfare students and workers. As a result of child welfare laws passed recently and up to a decade ago, the number of public child welfare transracial adoptions is likely to grow. These laws have changed practice and placement priorities in the public child welfare system. However, despite the provisions and priorities of the laws, little direction exists for understanding the needs of families that adopt transracially. In fact, prior to recent changes in the law, relatively little was known about the complexities or challenges of these unique families.

The central objective of this project is to move beyond the debate for or against transracial adoption as a placement option for children in need of permanency. A fair amount of literature focuses on this issue, while little attention has been placed on family issues and development. The fact that little descriptive or empirical information is available on transracial adoptive families means that coursework and training are likely to be lacking in fundamental information. Therefore, this curriculum provides timely and sensitive content on the central issues and can be used in parts or in its entirety. Following is a description of each of the curriculum chapters, potential uses and audiences, and training venues.

Chapter I - The Public Child Welfare Context for Contemporary Transracial Adoptive Families: Overview. This chapter provides an overview of the child welfare system and topics that are relevant for contemporary transracial adoptive families. It

specifically covers the child welfare system as a whole, the experience of Black children in the child welfare system, legislation relevant to transracial adoptive families, issues around race and adoption, the subject of openness and contact between birth and adoptive families, and finally, the issue of services and supports needed and used by families. The chapter relies on the use of statistics and research in the field to summarize and highlight the important information from these broad areas. An instructional guide, questions for discussion, and exercises accompany this chapter. *This chapter is essential background reading for students who are not familiar with the child welfare system, transracial adoption, or openness and contact. It can be used in its entirety, or particular sections can be pulled out and assigned to students.*

Chapter II – Normative Development in Transracial Adoptive Families.

Research on transracial adoptive families is limited by its overreliance on atheoretical research and the examination of children as the primary unit of analysis. Additionally, there is a significant lack of integration of approaches and empirical findings from disparate yet relevant literatures. To better understand transracial adoption, this chapter reviews and integrates these literatures, and offers a conceptual framework that can be used to examine the normative development of transracial adoptive families. While the previous chapter examined the macro and mezzo contexts related to transracial adoptive families, including broad issues and topics, this chapter focuses on understanding the micro context of the child and family. It provides a theoretical integration of literature in the field, and sets the stage for better understanding and interpreting the findings discussed in the next chapter. An instructional guide and

questions for discussion accompany this chapter. *This chapter is essential background reading for students unfamiliar with the theoretical issues related to transracial adoptive families. Experienced students and trained workers would also benefit from reading this chapter as it integrates a number of disparate literatures and provides a context for the rest of the curriculum.*

Chapter III – Enhancing Positive Outcomes in Transracial Adoptive Families: Themes from In-Person Interviews. This chapter provides findings from in-depth in-person interviews with a sample of 12 transracial adoptive families. While the interviews covered a broad range of topics, this chapter focuses on the adoption background and reasons for adoption, children's understanding of their adoption, the issues and experiences of openness and contact, race and the transracial adoptive family, community and family responses to adoption, and services and supports. An instructional guide, questions for discussion, and group exercises accompany the chapter. *A discussion of these findings is appropriate as part of a university class. It can also be used to highlight particular issues in a limited training on working with transracial adoptive families.*

Chapter IV – Case Vignettes. Six vignettes were generated from family interviews in order to bring the information to life and to further solicit thinking about the issues raised. Accompanying each vignette are case-specific questions for discussion. *This chapter is appropriate for any venue or level of knowledge on the topic.*

Chapter V – Practice Guidance for Social Workers. This chapter contains handouts appropriate for use with students, workers, or prospective or current

transracial adoptive parents. Topics covered include general issues about transracial adoption, identity, cultural competence, racial identity, racism, parenting children of color, diversity, and values. An instructional guide also accompanies this chapter. *This chapter can be used in a classroom setting or for training. It would be appropriate to use particular handouts to illustrate particular points or issues, or to provide the chapter in its entirety for reading and discussion.*

Chapter VI – Self-Assessment Guide for Considering Transracial Adoption.

This chapter contains a booklet to be used by potential transracial adoptive parents in order to provide them with measures by which to judge their comfort with the issues they will likely face as a transracial adoptive parent, and includes ideas about issues to address. *Students and workers can use the booklet to help them better understand the issues involved with the daily realities of parenting across racial lines once these issues are deemed important by prospective families or workers. Students or workers could be asked to complete the assessment as part of a training session and to discuss the implications of their answers for their work.*

References. All references cited in the curriculum are included in this section.

Appendixes. Study methods and interview protocols are detailed in this section.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This curriculum project was funded entirely by the California Social Work Education Center. We are thankful for the opportunity to complete it and for the support of research on transracial adoptive families. We want to express gratitude in particular to Susan Jacquet for her timely assistance and guidance during the grant period.

The consent of participating families made this project a reality. Their overall openness in sharing experiences and stories, both rewarding and challenging, and their desire to help future transracial adoptive families was inspiring. We deeply appreciate the time and energy necessary to participate in the project. We are also thankful for the children and youth who participated in interviews. Hearing children's perspectives is unusual and incredibly rich and important. Without their voices, the project would have much less meaning.

We would also like to acknowledge the significant contributions of Beth Hall and Gail Steinberg, Co-directors of Pact, An Adoption Alliance, which is based in Oakland, California. Beth and Gail assisted in the process of getting participants for the study, allowing us to draw from the "Building Understanding" sample. They also created and shared the Practice Guidance Handouts and Self-Assessment Booklets. The addition of these resources greatly enhances the value and utility of the overall curriculum for current and future public child welfare workers. Finally, Beth and Gail also gave permission for the use of passages from their book, *Inside Transracial Adoption*, which are sprinkled throughout the first chapter of the curriculum and bring the academic issues to life.

CURRICULUM COMPETENCIES FOR PUBLIC CHILD WELFARE IN CALIFORNIA

I. Ethnic Sensitive and Multicultural Practice

- 1.1 Student demonstrates sensitivity to clients' differences in culture, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.
- 1.2 Student demonstrates the ability to conduct an ethnically and culturally sensitive assessment of a child and family and to develop an appropriate intervention plan.
- 1.3 Student understands the importance of a client's primary language and supports its use in providing child welfare assessment and intervention services.
- 1.4 Student understands the influence and value of traditional, culturally based childrearing practices and uses this knowledge in working with families.
- 1.5 Student demonstrates the ability to collaborate with individuals, groups, community-based organizations, and government agencies to advocate for equitable access to culturally sensitive resources and services.

II. Core Child Welfare Practice

- 2.5 Student is aware of forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination pertaining to low-income and single-parent families and uses this knowledge in providing appropriate child welfare services.
- 2.10 Student understands policy issues and child welfare legal requirements and demonstrates the capacity to fulfill these requirements in practice.
- 2.11 Student understands the process of the legal system and the role of social workers and other professionals in relation to the courts.
- 2.12 Student understands how attachment, separation, and placement affect a child and family and how these experiences may influence a child's physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development.
- 2.13 Student understands the principles of concurrent and permanency planning.
- 2.14 Student understands the importance of working together with biological families, foster families, and kin networks, involving them in assessment and planning and helping them cope with special stresses and difficulties.
- 2.15 Student understands the value base of the profession and its ethical standards and principles, and practices accordingly.

III. *Human Behavior and the Social Environment*

- 3.1 Student demonstrates understanding of the stages, processes, and milestones of physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development of children.
- 3.2 Student demonstrates understanding of the stages and processes of adult development and family life.
- 3.3 Student demonstrates understanding of the potential effects of poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia, violence, and other forms of oppression on human behavior.
- 3.4 Student demonstrates understanding of the influence of culture on human behavior and family dynamics.
- 3.5 Student demonstrates understanding of how the strengths perspective and empowerment approaches can influence growth, development, and behavior change.

IV. *Workplace Management*

- 4.1 Student understands the need to negotiate and advocate for the development of resources that children and families need to meet their goals.
- 4.3 Student understands client and system problems and strengths from the perspectives of all participants in a multidisciplinary team and can effectively maximize the positive contributions of each member.
- 4.4 Student is able to identify an organization's strengths and limitations and is able to assess its effects on services for children and families.
- 4.5 Student is able to identify the strengths and limitations of an organization's cultural competence and commitment to human diversity and how these are demonstrated.

V. *Culturally Competent Child Welfare Practice*

- 5.4 Student demonstrates knowledge of and the ability to apply the Multiethnic Placement Act.

VI. *Advanced Child Welfare Practice*

- 6.1 Student demonstrates knowledge of the philosophy, purpose, requirements, and application of federal and state child welfare policy and legislation.
- 6.3 Student understands the requirements for effectively serving and making decisions regarding children with special needs and the balancing of parental and child rights.

- 6.6 Student works collaboratively with biological families, foster families, and kin networks, involving them in assessment and planning and helping them cope with special stresses and difficulties.

VII. *Human Behavior and the Child Welfare Environment*

- 7.4 Student is able to identify agency and legislative policies and procedures that create barriers to the growth and development of children and families.
- 7.6 Student can apply theories of human development and organizational change in developing intervention plans with clients.

VIII. *Child Welfare Policy, Planning, and Administration*

- 8.2 Student understands how political activities and regulatory, legislative, and judicial processes at local, state, and national levels influence agency policies, procedures, and programs.
- 8.4 Student understands how to use information, research, and technology to evaluate practice and program effectiveness, to measure outcomes, and to determine accountability of services.
- 8.5 Student demonstrates knowledge of how organizational structure and culture affect service delivery, worker productivity, and morale.
- 8.8 Student understands how professional values, ethics, and standards influence decision-making processes in public child welfare practice.
- 8.9 Student demonstrates the ability to negotiate and advocate for the development of resources that children and families need to meet their goals.

CHAPTER I

**THE PUBLIC CHILD WELFARE CONTEXT FOR
CONTEMPORARY TRANSRACIAL ADOPTIVE FAMILIES:
OVERVIEW**

CHAPTER I

THE PUBLIC CHILD WELFARE CONTEXT FOR CONTEMPORARY TRANSRACIAL ADOPTIVE FAMILIES: OVERVIEW

INSTRUCTIONAL GUIDE

This first chapter of the curriculum provides an overview of the child welfare system and topics that are relevant for contemporary transracial adoptive families. It specifically covers the child welfare system as a whole, the experience of Black children in the child welfare system, legislation relevant to transracial adoptive families, issues around race and adoption, the subject of openness and contact between birth and adoptive families, and finally, the issue of services and supports needed and used by families. The chapter relies on the use of statistics and empirical research in the field to summarize and highlight the important information and themes from these broad areas.

Contents

- Child welfare overview (page 4)
- Child welfare legislation and its relevance to transracial adoption (page 17)
- Race and adoption (page 34)
- Openness and contact (page 44)
- Adoption services and supports (page 65)
- Questions for discussion and reflection (page 78)

Instructors are encouraged to use this chapter in a variety of ways to suit the individual needs of their classes. Any or all of the sections may be photocopied and distributed. It may be assigned as introductory background reading in its entirety, or, as each section is designed to stand alone, separate sections can be pulled out and used for particular purposes. Instructors may also choose to use it solely for themselves, in

order to better familiarize themselves with areas in which they are less familiar. Questions for discussion are included at the end of the chapter to facilitate small or whole-group discussions, or simply to provoke further thinking on the topic.

This chapter can be used to promote the following competencies for public child welfare work or study:

- Ethnic Sensitive and Multicultural Practice - 1.1, 1.5
- Core Child Welfare Practice - 2.5, 2.10, 2.11, 2.13, 2.15
- Human Behavior and the Social Environment - 3.3, 3.4
- Workplace Management - 4.1, 4.3, 4.5
- Culturally Competent Child Welfare Practice - 5.4
- Advanced Child Welfare Practice - 6.1, 6.3
- Human Behavior and the Child Welfare Environment - 7.4
- Child Welfare Policy, Planning, and Administration - 8.2, 8.4.

INTRODUCTION¹

Providing needed, appropriate, and effective services and supports to contemporary transracial adoptive families is predicated on an understanding of the micro, mezzo, and macro contexts in which they form and exist. This chapter discusses the macro and mezzo contexts, including the overall child welfare system, the legislation that affects the formation and development of transracial adoptive families, cultural and societal issues regarding race, outcomes related to transracial adoption, the maintenance of open relationships between some birth and adoptive families, and services and supports for families adopting from the child welfare system, as an

¹ The narrative and quotations contained in the caption boxes throughout this chapter can be found in Steinberg, G., & Hall, B. (2000). *Inside transracial adoption: Strength-based, culture-sensitizing parenting strategies for inter-country or domestic adoptive families that don't "match."* Indianapolis, IN: Perspectives Press. Quotations from individuals other than the authors are noted.

overview for the rest of the curriculum. The micro context—including individual children, birth families, and prospective adoptive parents involved in family formation as a result of adoption—will be explored thoroughly in Chapter II (Normative Development in Transracial Adoptive Families).

Transracial adoption means that your family becomes “public” because the differences between family members are obvious to others. As a parent, you are on display. If you enjoy being different and standing out from the crowd, as a transracial parent you will get chances every day.

CHILD WELFARE OVERVIEW

Introduction

There are three main goals of the child welfare system: protecting children from maltreatment, preserving families, and in cases where children cannot live safely with their families, promoting alternative permanent legal family arrangements (Brooks & Webster, 1999). Over the last 20 years, significant legislation has supported the goals of the child welfare system and the thousands of children and families it serves (see *Child Welfare Legislation and Its Relevance to Transracial Adoption* section later in this chapter for a review of relevant legislation). However, in spite of the numerous laws and initiatives intended to support the goals of the child welfare system, enormous numbers of children are reported for maltreatment each year and removed from their homes (English, 1998). This section considers several factors relevant to an understanding of overall child welfare system issues. Specifically, it provides poverty and maltreatment statistics related to the population of children in care, presents the characteristics and

circumstances of children in care, and then looks at issues relevant to children of color who are served by the public child welfare system.

Definitions and Statistics

Data on social problems can be used to help explain trends in foster care. Poverty and child maltreatment data, for instance, have consistently identified poverty as a risk factor in child abuse and neglect (Freundlich, 1997). The correlation between poverty and child maltreatment is especially disturbing given the number of children in the United States living in poverty. Data from the United States Census Bureau (Proctor & Dalaker, 2003) reveal that in 2002, approximately 12.1 million children, or 16.7% of all U.S. children, were living below the federal poverty line (\$14,800 for a family of three with one child and \$12,400 for a family of two with one child). The proportion of children in the poverty population (35.1%) was higher than their proportion in the population as a whole (25.5%). The child poverty rate is much higher for children of color than for White children. In 2002, 32.3% of Black children and 28.6% of Hispanic children (of any race) were living in poverty. The rate for White (non-Hispanic) children was 9.54%. Poor children are also more likely to be from single-parent families.

With the growth over the past few decades in data collection efforts and in public awareness of child abuse and neglect (as well as in the prevalence of risk factors such as poverty, teen parenthood, and substance abuse), has come considerable growth in child maltreatment reports. Data compiled by the Child Welfare League of America ([CWLA]; Petit & Curtis, 1997) reveal that in 1976 there were 670,000 child abuse and neglect reports nationally for a rate of 10 per 1,000 children in the population. By 2002, an estimated 2.6 million referrals on behalf of 4.5 million children were made to child

protective services agencies for a rate of 35.9 per 1,000 children in the population. In California, 512,880 children were reported as abused or neglected (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2004).

Not all child abuse and neglect reports are referred for investigation, however. Nationally, in 2002, child protective service agencies screened out 32.9% of referrals and screened in 67.1% (DHHS, 2004). In California in 2001 (the most recent year for which these data are available), the screened-out rate was 31.1% and the screened-in rate was 68.9% (DHHS, 2003a). Of the 1,811,835 reports that were subsequently investigated nationally, just over a quarter (26.8%) were substantiated for a total child victim rate of 12.34 per 1,000 children in the population. In California, data for 2002, indicate that there were 132,181 child victims for a rate of 11.0% per 1,000 children. The three most common maltreatment types for children nationally are neglect, physical abuse, and sexual abuse. Of child maltreatment victims nationally in 2002, 58.5% (7.4 victims per 1,000 children in the population) were victims of neglect, 18.6% (2.3 victims per 1,000 children) were victims of physical abuse; and 9.9% (1.2 victims per 1,000 children) were victims of sexual abuse. In California, the three most common maltreatment types are neglect (44.3%), psychological maltreatment (16.3%), and physical abuse (13.2%). Sexual abuse accounted for 7.5% of California maltreatment cases in 2002 (DHHS, 2004).

Data on the race and ethnicity of child maltreatment victims in 2002 show that just over half (54.2%) of all victims were White, one quarter (26.1%) were African American, and one tenth (11%) were Hispanic (DHHS, 2004). Data further show that Black children are disproportionately more likely than children of other racial or ethnic

backgrounds to be victims of child maltreatment. In 2001, for every 1,000 Black children in the general population, 22 were substantiated victims of maltreatment, compared with 21 Native American children, 10 Latino children, 11 White children, and 5 Asian or Pacific Islander children (DHHS, 2003a). Of child maltreatment cases in California in 2002, 46% involved Latino children, 33% involved White children, 16% involved Black children, and about 5% involved either Asian or Native American children (Needell et al., 2003).

In addition to varying by race/ethnicity of victims, maltreatment also varies by victim's age. Overall, the rate of victimization is inversely related to the age of the child. Nationally, in 2002, the rate of victimization for the age group of birth to 3 years was 16 per 1,000 children of the same age group. The victimization rate for children 4 to 7 years old was 13.7; for children 8 to 11 years old, 11.9; for children 12 to 15 years old, 10.6; and for children 16 to 17 years old, 6.0 (DHHS, 2004). In California in 2002, 10% of child maltreatment cases involved children less than 1 year old; 11% involved children 1 to 2 years old; 17% involved children 3 to 5 years old; 30% involved children 6 to 10 years old; 26% involved children 11 to 15 years old; and the remaining 6% (roughly) involved children 16 years and older (Needell et al., 2003).

Based on the findings of a maltreatment investigation, child welfare agencies may provide services to victims and their families. Services can include placing children in out-of-home care, instituting court action (e.g., filing for temporary custody of the victim, filing for guardianship, or filing a dependency petition), and offering additional services such as in-home services, parenting classes, and counseling (Petit & Curtis, 1997). Of victims of abuse and neglect in 2002, about 19% were removed from their

homes and placed in foster care. And in California, of victims of abuse and neglect in 2002, about 31.4% were removed from their homes and placed in foster care (DHHS, 2004).

In summary, poverty and maltreatment data suggest that certain child and family characteristics place children at risk of foster care placement. In particular, poor Black children living in mother-only households appear to be at highest risk for maltreatment and subsequent placement in foster care. Younger children also appear somewhat more likely than other children to be at risk of foster care placement due to maltreatment.

Be a bridge. But don't make kids choose between family and race! Children can't make such a choice without negating parts of themselves. In order to feel whole, they must feel connected to all of the worlds they inhabit. Every adopted person has a dual identity: one based on genetic heritage, the other shaped by experiences in the family in which he grows up. For those adopted transracially, this duality plays out in the context of race. Your child needs to belong to groups you cannot belong to. So when you can't be the direct provider of culture, be a bridge to the culture your child needs to be a part of. Please don't feel discouraged by his participation in a culture that does not include you. The connecting links you can forge will not only support him, but will expand your family life in ways that will continue to unfold throughout your lives. Nothing could be more positive.

Characteristics of Foster Care Adoptions

Adoption: An Overview

When a child's biological parents are alive, adoption—that is the granting of legal parental rights to adults who are not genetically related to a child—is possible in two situations: when parents consent to their child's adoption and when parents' legal parental rights are involuntarily terminated (Mnookin & Weisberg, 2000). Public adoptions overwhelmingly are the result of involuntary termination of parental rights.

Before any adoption—public, private, or through an independent adoption agency—can occur, a home study is conducted as a means to ensure the child’s future safety and well-being. Assuming the home meets the minimum requirements for safety, a child will typically be placed in the adoptive home a minimum of 3 months before adoption finalization. During this time, the placement agency will make home visits to assess familial well being, including the child’s adjustment to his or her new home, and can remove the child if necessary. Finalization of adoption occurs in court proceedings that are confidential and closed to anyone not immediately involved in the case. Upon completion of the adoption, an amended birth certificate is issued with the names of the child and adoptive parents. Adoption laws vary from state to state. Therefore, in some states the original birth certificate is sealed from public view and in others it can be obtained by the adoptee. In cases where the adoptive child is not a U.S. citizen, immigration processes—a federal responsibility—are separate from adoption proceedings, which are handled by state or county agencies. Once the adoption is complete, the adoptive parents have the same rights and responsibilities as biological parents (Triseliotis, Shireman, & Hundleby, 1997).

In most states, involuntary out-of-home care and adoption placement is managed by county agencies. Counties adopt their own standards of practice, based on interpretations of state and federal law. However, county practice must meet state law, which must comply with federal law. These laws specify how biological parents must be treated, what minimum standards agencies must meet for services to children, and what considerations must be made when placing children in out-of-home care and in adoptive

homes. States and localities can adopt additional provisions to the ones specified in federal law, so long as they fit within the federal legal framework.

Owing in part to the passage of recent federal legislation, the number of adoptions from foster care has increased in recent years (see Section III for more information). Data from the United States Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS, 2003b) indicate that 542,000 children resided in foster care in 2001, the most recent year for which national foster care data are available. About 18% (50,000) of the 263,000 children exiting foster care in 2001 did so through adoption. This figure is nearly double the number of adoptions (24,000) completed in 1996. In addition to the children who were adopted, there were an additional 116,653 foster children identified as having a goal of adoption or whose parental rights had been terminated. In 2001, 35% of all adopted foster youth were Black, 38% were White, and 16% were Latino. In that same year 45% of waiting children were Black, 34% were White, and 12% were Latino. The gender distribution of children adopted from the public child welfare system was equally divided.

“When a white person says to me, ‘It doesn’t matter if they’re black, white, brown, or green...’ or ‘there’s only one race, the human race,’ a shudder goes down my spine. Those sentences erase a history of oppression and survival against odds, as well as a legacy of courageous resistance and struggle. They also set us up to fail. As we grow into our teens, transracially adopted children discover that being ‘human’ is simply not enough.”

-- Julia Sudbury-Oparah

Length of Stay

The length of stay in foster care further illuminates differences by age, region, gender, ethnicity, and type of care. Overall, the median length of stay for children who exited foster care in 2001 was 11.8 months. However, this varies significantly from state to state. In California, the median length of stay for children entering foster care for the first time is about 20 months for children residing in kinship placements and about 13 months for children in nonrelative foster care placements. Children living in urban regions typically have longer lengths of stay than nonurban regions both nationally and in California (Needell et al., 2003; Wulczyn, Brunner, & Goerge, 1999), males have slightly longer stays than females, and children who enter as infants stay longer than any other age group (DHHS, 2003b; Wulczyn et al.). In California, the median length of stay for Black children is longer than the median length of stay for Latino children, which is longer than the median length of stay for White children (Needell et al.). Finally, children who are placed in kinship care rather than family foster care have significantly longer median lengths of stay (Needell et al.; Wulczyn et al.).

Time to Adoption

Children are considered legally free for adoption when they have a permanent plan for adoption in place and their biological parents' rights have been terminated. In 2001, 126,000 foster children were waiting to be adopted. Many of these children wait significant periods of time for adoptive placements due to bureaucratic and familial barriers. Children waiting to be adopted in 2001 had been waiting a median of 35 months. About 13% had been waiting for 1 year or less, 21% between 12 and 24 months, and 18% between 24 and 36 months. Twenty-four percent of children waiting

for adoption in 2001 had been waiting 3 to 5 years and another 24% had been waiting 5 years or more (DHHS, 2003b).

Adoption Disruption

An issue to consider regarding foster care adoptions is the proportion that 'disrupt' or terminate, and the factors that predict it. Disruptions are those that end following the placement but prior to the legalization of the adoption, or those that terminate after the adoption is finalized (Barth & Berry, 1988). Though rates vary by year, state, and study population, the proportion of adoptions that disrupt is approximately 10 to 15% (Barth & Berry). Based on a review of the numerous studies of adoption disruption, Rosenthal (1993) indicates some of the most important factors that predict disruption: older age of the child at placement, inadequate parental preparation and information, unrealistic expectations of the child, low social support, a history of physical or sexual abuse prior to adoption, significant acting out behaviors, and adoptive placement with a non-foster parent or known relative. Other factors do not appear to be significantly associated with disruption, such as the gender of the child, level of developmental disability, ethnicity of the parents or child, or income level of the adoptive parents (Rosenthal).

Consequences of Maltreatment

Child maltreatment can carry severe long-term developmental consequences for children, which adoptive parents and families must contend with. Children can manifest physical problems, significant psychological and emotional problems, poor cognitive performance, and difficulties during adulthood (English, 1998). Additionally, long stays in foster care and multiple placements can contribute to further negative developmental

consequences. Adoption is generally the preferred placement for children who cannot return to their biological parents, though many children wait inordinate periods of time to experience permanency. Of the children who are placed in adoptive homes, many maintain some form or amount of contact with members of their biological family after the adoption is finalized. However, little is known about the practice and how it differs from adoptions that are decidedly open even prior to the birth of the adopted child.

The Child Welfare System and Black Children

Historically, Black children and families, as well as other children and families of color, were excluded from the formal child welfare services system. Rather than being provided by governmental agencies, child welfare services for this segment of the population were provided by mutual aid societies, self-help efforts of churches, women's clubs, fraternal organizations, and relatives (Ross, 1978). Adoption as a formal child welfare service was neither considered nor available for Black children until the end of World War II, when the Social Security Act made many social services available to Blacks (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972; Williams, 1991).

Marked efforts to find adoptive homes for Black children were intensified after the release of the National Adoption Survey (NAS) in 1955. The NAS, commissioned by the CWLA and the National Conference on Adoption, submitted that Black children were less likely to be adopted than other children though the need for adoption services by Black children was great. The NAS also revealed that Black children accepted for placement remained in care about twice as long as other children (Madison & Schapiro, 1973).

Following release of the NAS, adoptions of Black children increased from 1,685 in 1958 to 2,518 in 1962. During this period, adoptions of White children increased from approximately 19,000 to more than 23,000. Though adoptions of Black children had a higher net increase (43% during the 5-year period), adoption agencies were still unable to find enough racially matched families for Black children. Consequently, Black children continued to be the largest segment of unplaced children. Between 1962 and 1964, for instance, the number of Black adoptions represented approximately 10% of all adoptions. In 1965, only 9% of all unrelated adoptions were of Black children. Of Black children available for adoption 4 years later, less than one third (31%) were placed in adoptive homes, compared with 71% of White children available for adoption. In all, only 11% of the children adopted in 1969 were Black (Madison & Schapiro, 1973).

“Every black person knows in their soul that life is deeply unfair, while a remarkable number of white people skate through most of their lives unscathed, unmarked, unaware of the stacked hand they’ve been dealt.”

-- Joan Walsh

The lack of success, historically, in placing Black children has been attributed to several factors, including child welfare agencies’ and workers’ lack of experience in providing services to Black families. Agencies and workers, not recognizing the strengths in Black families, often acted on the belief that Black families were beset with pathology. Lack of attention to the traditional roles of single and elderly kin as caregivers for children in the traditional Black family is another example of this kind of misperception (Jackson-White, 1997). Besides the lack of experience in working with Black families, many adoption agencies had policies that overtly discriminated against

or screened out Blacks over the age of 40, as well as Black single parents and families not meeting minimum income requirements (Jackson-White). As a result, many prospective Black parents were eliminated from the eligible pool of candidates.

Due in large part to the lack of success in placing Black children, the 1970s witnessed the emergence of adoption agencies that were established specifically to serve the Black community (Williams, 1991). Moreover, public adoption agencies began re-examining their policies and practices to determine the extent to which Black families were being screened out of the adoption process. Consequently, many agencies began developing strategies to recruit aggressively and prepare Black families for adoption (Madison & Schapiro, 1973; Williams). Other efforts to find permanent homes for Black children included creating “quasi-adoption” and family-resource (fost-adopt) programs, developing long-term and permanent foster family care, providing adoption subsidies, and supporting single-parent adoptions (Madison & Schapiro). The most controversial alternative for finding permanent homes for Black children in need of permanency was to place them transracially, that is, with White families (see the section on *Race and Adoption* below for more information on this topic).

THE LANGUAGE OF RACE AND ADOPTION: A - Z

<i>African American:</i>	A person of African heritage who is a native or inhabitant of America.
<i>Asian/Pacific Islander:</i>	A person whose parents are member of one of the designated Asian ethnic groups (e.g., Bangladeshi, Burmese, Cambodian, Chinese, Fijian, Filipino, Hmong, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Laotian, Malayan, Pakistani, Samoan, Sri Lankan, Thai, Vietnamese).
<i>Bicultural:</i>	Having or showing competence in two cultures, balancing two cultures.
<i>Biracial:</i>	Having genetic parents belonging to two different races.
<i>Black:</i>	A term for a person of African descent.
<i>Culture:</i>	The customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group.
<i>Ethnic:</i>	Of or relating to races or large groups of people classed according to common traits and customs. Ethnic groups may be either a minority or a majority in a particular population.
<i>Ethnicity:</i>	Connectedness based on commonalities (such as religion, nationality, region) where specific aspects of cultural patterns are shared and where transmission over time creates a common history.
<i>European: American:</i>	A term applied to people with ancestry from mostly northern European countries; sometimes southern and eastern European ancestry is also implied.
<i>Heritage:</i>	Something transmitted by or acquired from a predecessor: a legacy. Something possessed as a result of one's natural situation or birth: a birthright.
<i>Hispanic:</i>	People of Latin American descent living in the U.S. (e.g., Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, etc.). Preferred term in the Midwest and on the East Coast. Many Hispanics prefer to be referred to according to their nationality.
<i>Indian:</i>	A native or inhabitant of India or the East Indies.
<i>Latino/Latina:</i>	A person of Latin descent living in the U.S. (e.g., Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, etc.). Preferred term on the West Coast. In California, many Mexican Americans choose to use the term Chicano/Chicana.

THE LANGUAGE OF RACE AND ADOPTION: A – Z (cont'd)

<i>Mulatto:</i>	A person of mixed race, usually derived of Black and White ancestry. Derived from the Spanish word for mule, this is a once derogatory term that is today sometimes used among biracial people about themselves. It is not a term we recommend that White people use.
<i>Multiracial:</i>	Formed through the coming together of two or more races (e.g., multiracial child, multiracial family).
<i>Native American:</i>	Member of indigenous tribes that live in the U.S.
<i>Oriental:</i>	A term that applies to objects like art and rugs derived from Asian cultures or countries, but does not properly apply to Asian people.
<i>People of color:</i>	Members of those groups in America that are and have been historically targeted by racism. This includes people of African, Asian, Latino, and Native American descent.
<i>Race:</i>	A class or kind of people unified by community of interests, habits, or physical characteristics. Groupings of mankind possessing traits that are transmissible by descent, and sufficient to characterize it as a distinct human type. The concept of human biological race is based on the false assumption that anatomical traits, such as skin color, hair, or facial traits cluster together in single distinct groups of people. There are no clearly distinct “Black,” “White,” or other races.
<i>Self-concept:</i>	The mental image one has of oneself.

CHILD WELFARE LEGISLATION AND ITS RELEVANCE TO TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION

Child welfare policy is dictated by the requirements set by federal law. States and localities must abide by the requirements set out in these laws. States typically pass their own laws that codify federal requirements and sometimes add additional requirements. As such, federal laws represent the minimum legally required, but not necessarily the maximum. Local child welfare agencies and juvenile courts then adopt

policies based on these rules and regulations. This section provides an overview of the laws that affect adoptive families in general and transracial adoptive families specifically.

Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980

In 1980, Congress passed the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (AACWA), which until recently remained the dominant legal framework for foster care and adoption. At the time this act was passed, there was significant concern that children remained in foster care too long and that there was a general lack of appreciation for the importance of children's connection to their natal families and communities. Until the passage of AACWA, federal funds were provided for children in out-of-home care, but not for agency efforts to prevent out-of-home placement, reunify children with their parents, or place children in permanent homes through adoption. In broadening the use of federal funds, AACWA made options other than out-of-home placement attractive to states.

In addition to creating financial incentives toward reunification, the AACWA also required states to make "reasonable efforts" to reunite children with their families, specifying that "in each case, reasonable efforts will be made (a) prior to the placement of a child in foster care, to prevent or eliminate the need for removal of the child from his home, and (b) to make it possible for the child to return to his home." This law also specified that children could only be removed from their parents when a "judicial determination" had been made that reunification with their family would be "contrary to the welfare of such child" and that reasonable efforts at reunification had been attempted. The AACWA also required states to develop a case plan for each child in

out-of-home care receiving maintenance payments from the federal government. The requirement that government agencies must make “reasonable efforts” to reunify families is one of the most significant pieces of the AACWA and seemingly created a significant change in social work practice: In 1982, there were 262,000 children in foster care placements, a noticeable drop from the 1977 level of 502, 000.

“Black is not black and white. White is not black and white. To be Black and White, or Latino and Anglo, or Native American and Japanese, is to be both and neither simultaneously. A world divided into boxes encourages us to choose one and let the other half rest in its shadow. But if we comply with that system, we find ourselves diminished, divided against our wholeness, not fully who we are.”

-- Lynda Martin

Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA)

In 1993, Congress enacted the Family Preservation and Support Services Program (FPSSP), which provided new state funding to support family preservation and community support services. States that implemented comprehensive planning processes to develop a “meaningful and responsive family support and family preservation strategy” were eligible for these new funds (DHHS, 1994). The programs were expected to provide services to keep families together or, if that was not possible, permanent placement with an alternative family. The overarching goal of the funds was to increase family stability in adoptive, foster, or extended families and to promote child safety and well being.

The provisions of the FPSSP were reauthorized as part of a larger, more sweeping reform of federal child welfare policy. The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997 presented the first major revision to the AACWA to ensure child safety

while in foster care and to promote timely permanency via adoption. Both the 1980 AACWA and 1997 ASFA require efforts to “prevent or eliminate the need for removing the child” prior to placement of the child in foster care and to “make it possible for a child to safely return home.” However, one important difference is that ASFA clarifies that reasonable efforts “shall not be required” in certain situations. States are not required to attempt reasonable efforts at reunification if a court has determined that the parent has subjected the child to “aggravated circumstances,” which may include situations involving abandonment, torture or extreme abuse, the death of another child, felony assault, or termination of rights regarding a sibling.

In addition to allowing agencies to deny some parents reunification services, ASFA created new timelines in which reunification must occur. Responding to allegations that children’s cases are slow to move forward towards a permanent plan and that states attempt reunification long after it is clear that a parent will not benefit from such services; these timelines attempt to move children toward a permanent placement as soon as possible. According to this legislation, a child enters foster care at “the first judicial finding that a child has been subjected to abuse or neglect” or 60 days after the child has been removed from the home. From this point, parents are legally entitled to 6 months to reunify with a child under the 4 years old and 12 months for a child who is older. According to ASFA, if a child has been “in foster care under the responsibility of the State for 15 of the most recent 22 months, or if a court...has determined a child to be an abandoned infant,” the state shall begin the process to terminate parental rights. ASFA also requires a case plan for each child that describes in detail the responsibilities of parents, social workers, and service providers to either

prevent removal or to facilitate reunification. The case is then to be judicially reviewed at least once every 6 months, with a permanency hearing—that is, a hearing to determine where it is in the best interests of the child to permanently reside—occurring within 12 months.

To promote permanency, ASFA requires child welfare agencies to establish a plan for case outcome. In cases where reunification is the goal, ASFA calls for agencies to also explore options for out-of-home care in the event that reunification efforts fail. This practice, known as “concurrent planning,” is mandated by ASFA, and represents a significant departure from previous child welfare law.

Concurrent Planning

Concurrent planning is an important aspect of case planning that includes development of an alternative plan for permanency for children in out-of-home care, while working with families toward reunification. ASFA states that “reasonable efforts to place a child for adoption or with a legal guardian may be made concurrently with reasonable efforts” to reunify. This latter provision, which creates the expectation for concurrent planning, requires states to “concurrently identify, recruit, process, and approve a qualified person for an adoption.” The concurrent planning model attempts to address multiproblem families by combining intense family outreach, expedited timelines, and the identification and placement of children with foster families who may be able to provide permanent homes, should reunification fail. The birthparent(s) is fully advised of both the concurrent planning process and the nature of the child's placement (Katz, 1999). The goal is to reduce the length of time children remain in foster care as

well as the number of placements, and to ultimately achieve permanency for young children.

Financial Incentives

Legislation leading up to the passage of ASFA included the creation of financial incentives to promote adoption. In 1996, Congress created a tax credit for adoptive parents, allowing up to \$5,000 in a nonrefundable tax credit for adoption expenses and up to \$6,000 in tax deductions for the adoption of “special needs children” who are usually hard to place. In a speech to introduce the Adoptions Incentives Act of 1995, which granted these tax benefits, according to Joseph Kennedy II, the bill’s sponsor, “180 of the Fortune 1000 companies have established corporate programs that provide financial assistance to employees to help cover adoption expenses,” and thus, should also receive tax relief (Adoption Incentives Act of 1995, Introduction). In promoting this legislation, Kennedy argued that “it is time that we send the message that adoption is a valued way of building a family and a future for our children” (Adoption Incentives Act of 1995, Introduction). The passage of this law set the stage for the passage of ASFA.

ASFA created other financial incentives to promote adoption. In addition to the tax incentives offered to adopting families and their employers, states receive financial rewards as well. The federal government pays states monetary bonuses of \$4,000 for each adopted child and \$6,000 for each child with special needs to states that increase their adoption rates over the prior year. In 2001, 42 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico received bonuses. California, which increased its adoption rates by 31%, received the largest award, getting \$4,030,572, compared with the second place awardee, Missouri, which received \$665,819 for their 47% growth. California was also

awarded the DHHS's Administration for Children and Families' "Adoption Excellence Award" for adoption increases (DHHS, 2001a).

Conclusion

By most accounts, adoption reforms have resulted in more children being adopted. In 1996, there were 27,761 adoptions of children who had involvement with a public child welfare agency nationwide (DHHS, 2001b). By 1999, that number soared to 46,072. Between 1998 and 1999, the proportion of finalized adoptions increased by 28% (DHHS, 2000). However, implementation of ASFA has also increased the number of children in foster care waiting for an adoptive placement (Barbell & Freundlich, 2001). AACWA and ASFA apply to all children in foster care. However, other legislation aims to affect the lives of children of color in the public child welfare system specifically. The following sections detail some key legislation in this area.

Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978

The Indian Child Welfare Act [ICWA] (1978) addresses prevention of placement in out-of-home care, issues surrounding placement, and adoption of American Indian children. In response to the widespread practice of removal of Native American children from their families and tribes and placement with non-Native American families and in institutions, this law specifically aims to protect the best interests of American Indian children within their tribal culture (Stein, 1998).

ICWA requires social services agencies to treat American Indian children differently from non-American Indian children. Whereas federal law requires states to make "reasonable efforts" to prevent out-of-home placement, ICWA requires "active efforts." In identifying out-of-home placements for either foster care or adoption, the law

requires that preference be given to relatives, tribal members, or homes or institutions approved by the tribe before considering a non-American Indian home (Stein, 1998). To remove a child from his or her home requires a higher evidentiary standard than in other cases. In these cases, removal must be deemed necessary based on “clear and convincing evidence” rather than the lower “preponderance of the evidence” standard used in other child welfare cases. To terminate the rights of American Indian parents requires the higher evidentiary standard of “beyond a reasonable doubt” (ICWA, section 1912 in Barbell & Freundlich, 2001). For cases involving children who qualify under ICWA, decision-making authority rests with tribal courts, rather than county or state juvenile courts.

ICWA also carries unique notification requirements. ICWA requires child welfare agencies to determine tribal ancestry and relationship to federally recognized tribes for American Indian children. The court must notify the child’s tribe and the Indian parent or custodian of any scheduled proceedings that could lead to the child’s out-of-home placement or termination of the Indian parent’s rights. If the tribal membership is not known, the court must give notice to the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Under ICWA, tribes have the right to intervene in court proceedings and may be given additional time to prepare motions of intervention or requests for transfer to tribal court venues (Barbell & Freundlich, 2001). It is worth noting that these specifications contradict some of the mandates of concurrent planning.

In addition to the unique requirements of ICWA, the law also provides a symbolically important statement. Passed by Congress to address the “alarmingly high percentage of Indian families” that were being “broken up by the removal, often

unwarranted, of their children from them” and the placements of Indian children outside their families and cultures (ICWA, section 1901, quoted in Barbell & Freundlich, 2001), ICWA was the first federal legislation to address the role of culture in the lives of children and families who come into contact with the child welfare system.

“I’d like to line up the people who hate Native Americans and wave my magic feather and turn them into Indians same as us. I’d take away their money and credit cards and make them live on a reservation in the middle of no place, on land the White people didn’t want so bad they gave it to us. They would have to make pottery, or get the hang of dancing, or make silver jewelry. They’d have to learn some Indian skills to get by. Then they’d see. They’d know why racism sucks.”

-- Natanya

The Multiethnic Placement Act and Interethnic Adoption Provisions

Revisions to federal child welfare policy are usually motivated by concerns that children are spending too long in foster care and are placed in too many homes without a reasonable expectation of either returning to their biological family or finding permanence with an adoptive family. These issues most significantly impact children of color who are overrepresented in out-of-home placements, are less likely to be adopted, and spend more time waiting to be adopted (Barth, Courtney, Berrick, & Albert, 1994; Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994). Addressing these issues directly, Congress passed the Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994 (MEPA). This law aimed to end the practice of racially matching children with adoptive parents, a policy believed to be one of the underlying reasons children of color wait to be placed in adoptive families. Specifically, MEPA has three goals: to reduce the length of time children wait to be adopted, to prevent racial discrimination in the process of placing children in out-of-home care; and

to facilitate the identification and recruitment of foster and adoptive families from diverse backgrounds who can meet waiting children's needs.

In 1996, MEPA was amended and clarified in legislation known as the Removal of Barriers to Interethnic Adoption (discussed in more detail later), or the Interethnic Adoption Provisions of the Small Business Job Protection Act (IAP) more generally. As amended, MEPA presents a significant change in how agencies consider placements, how they approach recruitment of care providers, and how they perceive the best interests of the child. MEPA has three major requirements meant to achieve its goals:

- Prohibition of delay, denial, or other forms of discrimination in placement decisions based upon race or national origin by adoption agencies or other entities that participate in adoptive placement and receive federal funds.
- Prohibition of federally funded agencies and other entities from denying pursuit of adoptive or foster placement based upon race or national origin of either the adoptive/foster parent or child.
- Requirement that states develop a recruitment plan that diligently identifies potential foster and adoptive families who reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of children in the same state who need permanent homes.

Substantive Provisions

Nondiscrimination provisions of MEPA apply to “any agency or entity that receives federal assistance and is involved in adoption or foster care placements” (Bussiere, 1995, p. 7). MEPA prohibits discrimination in placement decision-making. A placement decision is the decision to place, or to delay or deny the placement of a child in foster care or an adoptive home, and includes the decision of the agency or entity involved to seek the termination of birth parent rights or otherwise make a child legally available for adoptive placement (Bussiere). Consequently, these provisions apply throughout child welfare processes (e.g., emergency placement, care planning, case

review, and permanency planning). This is vitally important because the agency is responsible for nondiscriminatory practice regardless of the child's status regarding adoption. Agencies may neither delay nor deny placement solely on the basis of race, color, or national origin of the child or adult involved.

To assist agencies in application of MEPA and related provisions of the U.S. Constitution and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Department of Health and Human Services (1995) published *Policy Guidance on the Use of Race, Color or National Origin as Considerations in Adoption and Fostering (Guidance)*. This publication provides examples of policies and practices that violate MEPA or Title VI (e.g., time periods during which only same-race or same-ethnicity search occurs). *Guidance* clearly indicates that use of race, culture, or national origin as a factor in placement is permissible only when the agency has made an individualized determination that a particular case requires it to advance the best interests of the child. *Guidance* expands MEPA through emphasis on the importance of diligent recruitment to establish adequate pools of capable families willing to foster and/or adopt waiting children.

Interethnic Adoption Provisions

On August 20, 1996, President Clinton signed the Removal of Barriers to Interethnic Adoption. This new law refined MEPA's provisions such that any person or government involved in adoption or foster care placements may not "deny to any person the opportunity to become an adoptive or foster parent, on the basis of the race, color, or national origin of the person, or the child, involved" by deleting the words "categorically" and "solely" from the language in MEPA. In addition, the provisions also

indicated that all parties involved in adoption or foster care placement services may not “delay or deny the placement of a child for adoption or into foster care, on the basis of the race, color, or national origin of the adoptive or foster parent, or the child involved” with deletion of the phrase, “or otherwise discriminate in making a placement decision” and “solely” from the language of MEPA (Brooks, Barth, Bussiere, & Patterson, 1999). This new law also included enforcement provisions specifying fiscal sanctions by DHHS for violation of the law along with individual right to sue in federal court for violation of the law.

DHHS (1997) then issued an “Information Memorandum” clarifying the intent of Congress to eliminate placement delays where avoidable, re-emphasizing that race, culture, or ethnicity could not be used for delay or denial of foster or adoptive placement. Any consideration of race, culture, or ethnicity as a placement factor must be based on specific circumstances of the individual case.

“When the kids at school started teasing me and asking ‘Is that your real mommy?’ I realized they think our family is strange and maybe not as good a family as theirs. I don’t like it and it makes me feel uncomfortable, ashamed, mad, and nervous that somebody might say I’m different and something’s wrong with me.”

This often occurs at 6-8 years old, when peer-reaction to their proud announcements that they were adopted have created children’s own awareness that adoption isn’t universally admired and accepted.

Issues in Implementation of MEPA

The legal mandates of MEPA and the Interethnic Adoption Provisions are difficult to translate into child welfare practice. Brooks et al. (1999) describe six issues contributing to implementation challenges: (a) the controversial nature of the subject

matter, (b) lack of clarity in the law, (c) unrealistic assumptions and expectations, (d) lack of information, (e) competing interests and lack of control over significant factors, and (f) lack and poor use of resources.

Controversial Nature of the Issues. The controversy over racial matching policies and transracial adoptions continues. In spite of legal prohibition against categorical assumptions about the benefit of inracial placements, workers must still make decisions regarding the importance of race on a case-by-case basis and whether consideration of race is in the best interest of the child. Child welfare workers' personal views will likely impact their application of the law. It may be that those who believe strongly about same-race placement as preferable to transracial placement will experience resentment that federal policy challenges their conviction and mandates placement decisions without consideration of race. In contrast, those whose views place little value on same-race placement may have difficulty assessing which cases do have a specific need for same-race placement.

Lack of Clarity in the Law. MEPA and the DHHS's (1995) *Guidance* provide only broad guidelines. There is little direction for child welfare workers about *how* to evaluate when to apply race as a placement factor. Key provisions, such as "delay" in placement lack explicit definition. In addition, there are contradictory messages about recruitment; while encouraging targeting of communities of color, the law prohibits discrimination on the basis of race. Although it may be possible to construct policies that effectively target communities of color previously excluded from recruitment efforts while still welcoming all prospective parents interested in either foster care or adoption, courts may disagree on what constitutes an appropriate boundary.

Unrealistic Assumptions and Expectations. A significant goal (and expectation) of MEPA was reduction of the number of children awaiting adoptive placement. This expectation assumes that racial matching policies have contributed to substantial delays or even denials of adoption. However, the child welfare system is complex and numerous factors impact timelines for placement. Cahn and Johnson (1993) indicate searches for missing parents, overloaded court dockets, and confusion about the legal standards for termination of reunification services, the reluctance of some judges to termination of parental rights, high caseloads, lack of resources, and adoptive parents' unwillingness to accept children with particular backgrounds as a few of the factors affecting the timing of adoptive placement.

Lack of Information. To date, there is no empirical support for or against racial matching or the impact of same-race placement policies on placement timeframes. There is also very little information about the role of race in development of children's self-esteem, capacity for adjustment, or long-term outcomes. We also know very little about accurate assessment of a child's needs based on race, evaluation of children with mixed heritage, a family's ability to meet the needs of transracially adopted children in relation to race, nor provision of effective services to families adopting transracially.

Competing Interest and Lack of Control. The implementation of MEPA and the Interethnic Adoption Provisions is in the hands of policymakers and administrators. Child welfare workers lack control over many of the factors affecting placement. For example, early foster care placements rarely consider needs related to race and ethnicity in spite of the possibility of long-term arrangements. As a result, the child's relationship to the caretakers as well as statutory foster parent preferences contribute to

limits on worker discretion in making adoptive placement decisions. Additional conflicting factors impacting implementation of the law include the need for family reunification, kinship placement, keeping siblings together, and proximity to the child's family, community, and needed services.

Lack and Poor Use of Resources. MEPA and the Interethnic Adoption Provisions mandates do not include additional resources. It will be difficult for child welfare agency workers to find the time, funding, and other support needed to fully implement these legal provisions. Even training in MEPA has been limited. It is likely that the available resources are not utilized as effectively and efficiently as could be possible.

Openness and Postadoption Contact Statutes

In addition to significant legislation affecting children in out-of-home care, one of the emerging questions that remains to be thoroughly tested is the extent to which legislatures and courts should become involved with open adoption arrangements, or the maintenance of contact between adoptive and birth families following adoption (Hollinger, 1998). Although openness is primarily discussed in the literature and research in terms of independent adoption, state legislatures creating contact statutes are currently responding more to the needs of children adopted from the public child welfare system (Appell, 1998). Child welfare experts argue that the traditional legal model of adoption imposes a barrier to finding permanent homes for older foster children, and to creating successful adoption placements (Appell), though there is no empirical evidence to rely upon. In a discussion of the current state of adoption law with respect to postadoption contact, Appell states that:

twenty-five percent of the states have passed adoption legislation that contemplates ongoing contact between birth and adoptive families. Within the past decade, twelve states, six in 1997 alone, have expanded legal adoption to include adoption with contact (i.e., enforceable cooperative adoption agreements). Other states have recognized that these agreements may exist and have promoted them, even though these statutes do not provide for enforcement of these agreements. Several more state statutes permit courts to order postadoption contact (pp. 24-25).

Postadoption contact statutes differ significantly by which children are eligible for contact (all children, only older children, or only dependent children), with which members of the biological family contact may occur (only biological parents, birth relatives the child lived with, or all birth relatives), the type of contact that is acceptable (identifying information, communication, or actual visitation), which parties must agree to the contact (court, agency, adoptive parents, biological parents, and older children), the standards for court approval of the agreement (typically the best interests of the child), and finally, the standards for enforcement or modification of the agreement (only modification, complete enforcement, or requirements for mediation prior to court involvement; Appell, 1998). For example, Minnesota passed a postadoption contact statute in 1997 that involves a written court order at the time of the adoption filing, based on the best interests of the child, for contact with the biological family. All children are eligible to have contact with any relatives they lived directly with, but the contact must be agreed upon in writing by the court, adoptive parents, birth relatives, and the

agency involved. Furthermore, all parties must participate in mediation prior to court involvement with any disputes over the contact, at which time the court may enforce the contact agreement or modify it depending on the child's best interests (Appell).

In addition to the move toward recognition of contact agreements by state legislatures, there is serious interest in developing national adoption law and standards (Hollinger, 1998). The National Conference of Commissioners on Uniform State Laws originally drafted a Uniform Adoption Act in 1953, and revised it in 1969 and 1971. However, only eight states ever enacted a version of the act (Hollinger, 1993). The provisions of the Uniform Adoption Act of 1994 have been heavily debated and have not been enacted. Groups such as the Child Welfare League of America, Concerned United Birthparents, and the American Adoption Congress argue that the proposed act focuses more on the rights of adults to adopt, is detrimental to the well-being of children, and is unfair to birthparents (Hollinger, 1993). In terms of postadoption contact, if enacted, the Uniform Adoption Act would terminate all court orders for communication or visitation. Agreements for contact would be those created informally by the adoptive and biological parents, and not subject to enforcement by courts (Hollinger, 1997). It is possible that the lack of court-supported agreements for contact could undermine the biological parent's ability to continue contact if the adoptive parents change their mind. However, without more empirical studies of the families who are currently practicing postadoption openness, it is impossible to know what arrangements exist and how they are being followed.

RACE AND ADOPTION

Race and ethnicity are central to public discussions of child welfare and adoption. As federal law has shifted to streamline the process of placing children in permanent homes, many questions remain about what is in the best interests of children of color. Along with needing permanent, stable homes, other questions about how to best address their cultural and social needs remain. This section examines the historical controversies surrounding transracial adoption, discusses the goals of finding culturally appropriate placements for children of color, and considers what kinds of outcomes social welfare practitioners should be aiming to achieve.

Historical Overview

The treatment of children of color in child welfare has been controversial since the mid-20th century. Of particular controversy are the practices and policies in many child welfare jurisdictions of “racial matching.” Race matching, or matching the phenotypic characteristics of children with their adoptive parents, was to varying degrees believed to significantly facilitate successful bonding between parent and child. Same-race placements have traditionally been considered to be in the best interest of the child. In contrast, transracial placements were generally considered less desirable and to be acceptable only when a same-race placement was unavailable or under special circumstances. Understanding some of the major controversies surrounding race matching is essential when trying to address the needs of children of color in the child welfare system. As such, this section provides an historical overview of the practice of race matching and discusses the controversy surrounding same-race and transracial placement and adoption.

The roots of controversy surrounding the practice of placing children of color in White homes lie in the civil rights movement, beginning in the 1960s. The civil rights movement created awareness of the plight of minority children living out their lives in public foster care systems. The shortage of White children available for adoption combined with adoption workers' desire to reduce the foster care population led to popular support for White parents adopting Black children (Silverman, 1993). This practice mirrored the integrationist ideology that dominated the civil rights movement, which added to its popularity (Bartholet, 1992). Between 1962 and 1976, more than 12,000 transracial adoptions were recorded (Silverman). In the years between 1968 and 1971, the number of transracial adoptions tripled (Bartholet).

As the numbers of Black children placed in White homes began to rise dramatically, Black social workers began to question whether such placements were in the best interests of Black children and whether they were jeopardizing the integrity of the Black community. This concern came to a head in 1972 when the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) issued a policy statement condemning transracial adoption. A resolution passed at NABSW's annual meeting stated:

Black children should be placed only with black families whether in foster care or for adoption. Black children belong, physically, psychologically and culturally in black families in order that they receive the total sense of themselves and develop a sound projection of their future. Human beings are products of their environment and develop their sense of values, attitudes and self-concept within their family structures. Black children in white homes are cut off from the healthy development of themselves as black people.

The NABSW's position and their extensive advocacy work essentially eliminated transracial adoptions from foster care. Although the CWLA, the oldest and largest national member organization, had issued guidelines in 1968 promoting transracial adoption from foster care, the organization changed their *Standards for Adoption Service* in 1973 to publicly re-emphasize same-race adoption. Public and private agencies quickly adopted policies to promote same-race adoptions (Hollingsworth, 1999). Illustrating the success of the NABSW campaign, transracial adoptions peaked in 1971 at 2,574; in 1975, that figure plummeted to 831.

An additional policy change that favored children's continuing ties to their biological families and communities followed the 1979 case of *Miller v. Youakim*. In this case, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that states had to pay relatives who were caring for foster children in kinship care arrangements the same rate as licensed foster parents, so long as the relatives could meet the requirements for foster care licensing. This policy change created new opportunities for children to remain with biological relatives and in their own communities, consistent with the NABSW's position. Although not all relatives can meet foster care licensing requirements—states have different requirements for foster care licensing for relatives (Boots & Geen, 2001)—the shift in policy placed a premium on children's relationships to their family history and culture. It has led more recently to the rising use of kinship care arrangements, particularly among children of color (Berrick, Needell, & Minkler, 1999).

In California, a hierarchy of adoptive placement preferences that incorporated race as a key factor existed (Brooks et al., 1999). These placements ideally would occur within 90 days of relinquishment or termination of parental rights. Ideally, children would

be placed in a kinship placement. If kinship care was unavailable (or not in the best interest of the child), the second preference was same-race placement. If a child could not be placed in one of those two kinds of placement within the 90-day timeframe, a transracial placement was acceptable so long as the parents were believed to be sensitive to the child's race, ethnicity, and culture. These policies and preferences remained largely unchanged until the passage of the Multiethnic Placement Act and related statutes.

“When I look back at my experiences as a Black kid growing up in a White town, all I can say is, ‘It sucks.’ My parents believed that a loving family ‘makes’ the child. I disagree. Many of my issues may not even have existed had I lived in a more appropriate environment. My question is why even deal with this when you have other alternatives. There are many places that a family can live a rural life and still be close enough to a city to provide their children with enriching and firsthand experiences of their culture...when I was a child my life wasn’t ‘colorless.’ It was White. And colorblindness is a luxury Black children can’t afford. Love does not prepare an African American child for the society we live in. And love does not replace the importance of knowing your own ethnicity and culture. Today I say I am African American.”

-- Rachel Nordlinger

Goals of Culturally Relevant Placements

Examining the issues facing children of color in child welfare is in large part predicated on the belief that children from different racial and ethnic backgrounds have unique cultural needs that need to be respected in order for a child to flourish. However, operationalizing the concept of culture—or created public policy and practice respectful of cultural differences—is difficult. The term “culture” refers to the thoughts, ideas, behavior patterns, customs, values, skills, language, arts, and faith or religion of a particular group at a given point in time (CWLA, 2004).

Being aware of culture has two pieces. First, social workers can be most effective when they adopt a model of service provision that is relevant to the clients' cultural framework. This is often called "cultural competence." The CWLA (2004) defines cultural competence as:

the ability of individuals and systems to respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations, and faiths or religions in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families, tribes, and communities, and protects and preserves the dignity of each.

Development of cultural competence is a continuous process of learning about group differences along with integration of culture-based strengths and perspectives. Effective child welfare practice requires having the knowledge of cultural differences and the ability and skills to apply that knowledge to all aspects of child welfare practice. For example, culture shapes the nature of family situations, influences how family members respond to the caseworker, and affects how the family may perceive a social service agency, or how willing children and parents are to share information. Cultural differences affect parenting practices, definitions of family and familial responsibility, and the very meanings of collaboration. Knowledge of cultural factors impacts the caseworker's ability to evaluate family needs, problems, and strengths.

To be effective, social workers ideally adopt a family-centered approach to service provision. Underscored by a positive relationship between the caseworker and family members, this approach requires the caseworker to understand and problem-solve within the family's own cultural context. A family-centered approach utilizes

indigenous resources such as local agencies, extended family members, family neighbors and friends, and community support networks to provide services that are consistent with the family's culture and values. It is also more likely the family will engage in on-going supportive services if intervention has been culturally sensitive (Rycus & Hughes, 1998).

“Sometimes I wish I could crawl in a hole. I hate the way people get that look on their face or laugh when I talk. Then they speak extra slow, or extra loud to me. I know I have an accent—I was born in Vietnam. I’m not retarded and I’m not deaf. I wonder how they think they would sound if they tried to speak Vietnamese.”

— Sam, age 17, from Steinberg & Hall (2000)

The second relevant aspect of cultural competence is an appreciation for the unique needs of children in the child welfare system. Children of color need to have information about their own cultural heritage as well as support in learning to navigate through a racialized society. Speaking to this responsibility, several writers have pointed out the role Black parents play as buffers between their children and societal racism (Collins, 2000; Dickerson, 1995; Lorde, 1992; & Thornton, 1997). Some of these works point out how raising children of color does not simply require teaching about one's heritage, but in fact, facilitates survival. This body of work points to the Black parents as “a filter of societal information and a primary interpreter of the social structure for their children” (Thornton, p. 201).

A growing body of work points to the ways in which White people in the United States are unaware of the significance of race (Frankenberg, 1993, 1997; hooks 1984, 1990, 1997; McIntosh, 1992; Wellman, 1993;). McIntosh, for instance, notes that as a White woman raising her children, “I did not have to educate our children to be aware of

systematic racism for their own daily physical protection” (p. 74). Clearly, someone must do this for children of color, even those in the child welfare system. These questions of how to best raise a child of color have been central to debates over transracial adoption. The question usually posed is whether children of color, often African American, should be placed in the homes of White parents and whether those parents can meet their unique needs.

Examining Outcomes of Children Who Were Transracially Adopted

Only a small number of empirical studies have adequately addressed issues relevant to the psychosocial development of transracial adoptees. Although there is considerable disagreement over the interpretation of the findings from these studies, most have found that the experience of being adopted transracially does not harm children’s psychological well-being per se (Bagley, 1993; Fanshel, 1972; Feigelman & Silverman, 1984; Grow & Shapiro, 1974; Ladner, 1977; Shireman & Johnson, 1986; Simon, Altstein, & Melli, 1994; Vroegh, 1993; Zastrow, 1977). Findings do suggest, however, that transracial adoptees tend to be highly acculturated to the majority (White American) culture and to have weak affiliations and identifications with others of their same racial group(s) (Andujo, 1988; Brooks, 2003; McRoy, Zurcher, Lauderdale, & Anderson, 1982).

We moved when James was just a year old to a new house in a new neighborhood. When our neighbor finally had the nerve to approach, both kids were collapsed in the double stroller after an energetic excursion to the park—Sofia was all ears. “So, I guess you do a lot of baby-sitting?” the neighbor asked. Jean was definitely in the category of someone who needed to understand so we stood for a while as she cooed over the children and told me about hers, already grown.... After our chat that day I asked my 3-year-old Sofia if she knew why Jean had asked about babysitting. “Oh Mommy, she can’t figure out how we go together because we are all different colors. Some people just don’t get it!”

Bagley (1993) studied 27 transracially adopted Black or mixed children and 25 inracially adopted White children and found the groups similar in terms of their self-esteem, adjustment, and racial orientation. Rosenthal, Groze, Curiel, and Westcott (1991) reported similar positive findings on adoptees' development in a study of 296 special needs children, 66 of whom were transracially adopted. Findings from the study show that as a group, transracial adoptees were doing well overall, but that parent-child relationships were more positive among inracially adoptive families than among transracially adoptive families. Rosenthal and his colleagues attributed this finding to the differing characteristics of the children at adoption. Compared with their counterparts, transracial adoptees presented, at the time of adoption, handicaps that were more serious and backgrounds that were more problematic. When controlling for these pre-placement variables, transracial placement was found to neither enhance nor hinder parent-child relationships.

Andujo (1988) studied 60 Latino transracial and inracial adoptees, gathering data in independent interviews with adoptees and their parents. Although there were no significant differences between groups in their self-concept, there were differences in how they described their basic identity and how they viewed their bodies, physical appearance, skills, sexuality, and health status. Transracial adoptees were also more likely than inracial adoptees to identify themselves as Americans, compared to Mexican Americans, to use color as a self-descriptor, and to have a higher level of acculturation to the dominant White American culture. McRoy et al. (1982) examined self-esteem and racial identity in a sample of 30 Black transracially adoptive families and 30 inracially adoptive families. No significant differences were found between the two groups in self-

esteem; however, they did differ in their racial self-descriptions. DeBerry, Scarr, and Weinberg (1996) studied adolescent and young adult Black transracial adoptees. The researchers used discriminant and longitudinal path analyses to examine 128 Black transracial adoptees between 17 and 24 years old. Data for the study were gathered in face-to-face, structured interviews with both the subjects and their adoptive parents. Fifty percent of transracial adoptees were reported as maladjusted according to subject data versus 66% according to parent data. While maladjustment was positively correlated to having experienced “transracial adoptive stressors” (p. 2390; e.g., racial stress, lack of belonging, and racial appearance), DeBerry et al. point out that no single variable predicted adjustment outcomes. Rather, variables had combined differential effects for adjusted and maladjusted transracial adoptees.

Black transracial adoptees have also been followed in several longitudinal studies. One such effort by Vroegh (1997) followed 20 Black inracial adoptees and 35 Black transracial adoptees for 17 years. Most adoptees were found to have good self-esteem and few racial identity problems, regardless of placement type. No relationship was found between self-esteem and racial identification. Begun in 1972, Simon et al. (1994) conducted a longitudinal study of 204 adoptive families. Among them, the families had 366 children, 157 of whom were transracially adopted, 167 of whom were White birth children, and 42 of whom were White adopted children. In describing their findings from the first phase of the study, Simon et al. declared that transracial adoption appeared to provide the opportunity for children to develop racial awareness and respect for the physical differences imposed by racial background, and an ease with their own racial characteristics. In 1979, however, adoptees began exhibiting problem

behaviors, such as stealing from other members of the family. Yet, data from the final two phases in 1984 and 1991, revealed no differences between transracial and inracial adoptees on measures of self-esteem and family integration (see also Simon & Altstein, 1981).

Another longitudinal study yielding mixed findings regarding the effect of transracial adoption on children was begun in 1977 by Feigelman and Silverman (1983). The original study sampled over 700 inracially and transracially adoptive families. Findings from the first wave suggested that children were developing well and were not harmed by their experience of being adopted transracially. Similarly, findings from a 1981 follow-up (Feigelman & Silverman, 1984) indicate that overall transracial adoptees were no more poorly adjusted than inracial adoptees. However, as they grew older, Black transracial adoptees were found to exhibit more signs of poor adjustment than their non-Black counterparts. Feigelman and Silverman attributed these differences to the older ages at which the Black children were placed and their more troubled pre-placement histories rather than to any element associated with transracial adoption.

Findings from a 1993 follow-up (Brooks & Barth, 1999) of the Feigelman and Silverman sample reveal that, controlling for age at placement, both transracially adopted Black males and inracially adopted White males experienced significantly more behavioral problems than transracially adopted Asian males and females, transracially adopted Black females, and inracially adopted females. In general, however, adoptees appeared similar to one another in their characteristics and outcomes.

Summary/Conclusion

Race will remain a central issue in child welfare system performance. Researchers, policymakers, and practitioners need to give greater attention to the nexus of race and ethnicity as a factor in the functioning of child welfare services. To improve child welfare outcomes, service models that demonstrate greater efficacy with persons of color need to be developed, implemented, and evaluated.

When White families adopt children of color, we unconsciously expect a great deal of the children. We expect them to integrate into our White families and become full members of our cultures. We expect them to learn our language, accept our values, and, often, to spend the majority of their waking lives with White people like us instead of with people who resemble them. One way to get an inkling of how enormous a stretch we are demanding of them is to seek out situations where we will be the only White person present—either in church, at a particular shopping center, in a class, at a restaurant, at the movies, in the mall, etc. When people of color are in the majority, it usually affects our sense of safety, confidence, and acceptance in ways we did not question before.

Sometimes White parents say that they are afraid to be the only White person in a group. All of us understand that in the U.S. such fears are common and are fed on a daily basis by the media, the entertainment industry, institutional racism, and our own individual priorities. The question is how dare we demand more of our children than we would feel comfortable asking of ourselves? How many times have our children had the experience of being the only person of their race or ethnicity in a group? Sometimes having the most of something isn't so great. Seek out regular situations in which you will share your child's experience of being "the only one." You will learn great respect for her ability to cope.

OPENNESS AND CONTACT

Adoption practices, regardless of race, have shifted dramatically in the last several decades from complete confidentiality at placement toward a continuum of openness. Open adoption typically refers to the maintenance of contact between adoptive and biological families following the placement of adopted children. Contact can differ in terms of who initiates and is involved in the contact, including the adopted

child, adoptive parents, biological parents, or other adoptive and biological relatives. In mediated adoptions, contact occurs through a third party, such as an agency or a lawyer, rather than directly. Contact can also differ in form (e.g., information, pictures, gifts, letters, phone calls, face-to-face visits), frequency, and duration (Curtis, 1986). In short, open adoptions are unlike traditional, closed adoptions in that the latter generally involve the termination of *all* contact between adoptive and biological families and the former do not.

While the practice of placing children in open adoptions is still relatively new in the United States, it has become standard in many agencies (Etter, 1993). Its use began in the 1970s primarily with independent adoptions, those in which a pregnant biological mother and the potential adoptive parents made an agreement for adoption and continuing contact outside the jurisdiction of an agency (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998). However, in states where postadoption contact is legally sanctioned through state statutes it is primarily considered to be in the interests of older children adopted from the child welfare system who have a relationship with their biological family (Appell, 1998).

The practice of open adoption has caused serious controversy between those who are ardent defenders of the practice and those who strongly oppose it. However, despite the increase in open adoptions over the last 30 years and the ensuing debate about contact and the unlocking of records, little empirical data exist about openness among families involved in adoptions, particularly families who adopt former foster children (Berry, Dylla, Barth, & Needell, 1998).

The number of children in foster care who need permanent homes because they cannot return to live with their biological parents has increased dramatically in the last decade and is expected to continue in the future (English, 1998). At the same time, the enactment of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (1997) suggests that more children in foster care will be freed for adoption in the coming decade. An emphasis on helping children to maintain “family continuity” as a principle aim of child welfare services (Downs, Costin, & McFadden, 1996) has led to the search for more ways to reduce the disruption children experience after placement in foster care or when their biological ties are severed. Open adoption is one such strategy that may also encourage the voluntary relinquishment of foster children to adoptive families.

Clearly, the use of open adoption in child welfare services has the potential to decrease the time that children linger in foster care while waiting for a permanent home, increase the number of voluntary relinquishment adoptions, and provide significant benefits to all members of the adoption triad. However, until the public discourse on openness shifts from the independent and private adoption arena to include the public child welfare system, it will be impossible for adoption social workers and advocates to know what practices are truly in the best interests of all members of the adoption triad.

Historical Background

The history of adoption as a permanency planning option within child welfare services is brief in comparison to the more expansive history of adoption in general. Similarly, the use of confidential or closed adoption is quite recent from a historical perspective, emerging only during this century. There have been a number of major societal changes in the last 50 years contributing to the way that adoption is currently

conceptualized. A brief historical overview will place the contemporary controversies and practice of open adoption in a complex framework.

Early History

In the United States during the colonial period, all laws were a function of English common law, which did not recognize adoption because there was no need for the practice (Sokoloff, 1993). The provision of male heirs for childless couples was not necessary because property inheritance was based solely on bloodlines. The care of dependent children was based on the economic needs of the colonies rather than on children's needs for nurturance. Similarly, childhood, rather than being a time for play and discovery as it is now conceived, was focused on training and preparation for work as an adult (Mason, 1994). Children who were orphaned, bastards, or from extremely poor families were commonly "put out" to provide labor for another family through indenture or apprenticeship. Legal contracts were based on the male head of the household's preparation of the child for adulthood and the child's fulfillment of labor, rather than on familial ties and obligations to the child as in adoption (Mason).

The advent of the industrial revolution, massive waves of immigration, and concomitant increases in the numbers of poor or dependent children created a strain on the practice of "placing out" (Sokoloff, 1993). Adoption became a way, then, to provide a legal relationship between children who had been taken in and the parents who cared for them. However, because of the absence of a legal framework from English common law, United States adoption law is based on individual state statutes (Avery, 1998). The first state adoption statute was legislated in Massachusetts in 1851, and also represented the first time that the stated purpose was to promote the welfare and

interests of the child (Cole & Donley, 1990). Among the provisions of the first statute were the requirements that the adoptive parents were deemed fit by the judge to provide appropriate care for the child, and that the biological parents gave written consent to the act (Presser, 1972).

The “placing out” of children remained common practice until the late 19th century. While a consideration of the interests of children was becoming more common, when it came to large numbers of dependent children, the focus remained on relieving the economic burden on particular communities. “Placing out” rather than asylum or institutional placement became a formal method of dealing with large numbers of “unworthy poor” or orphaned children in urban eastern cities by the New York Children’s Aid Society and its founder, Charles Loring Brace. Whether through fostering or adoption, many thousands of typically older children were sent to live permanently with families in rural Midwestern and Western states in what became known as the “orphan train movement” (Cook, 1994). However, it should be noted that the emphasis was almost entirely focused on children of European heritage. The expressed purpose of the movement was to provide farming families with additional labor, to improve the morality of poor children by sending them to “good homes” which would be permanent, and to reduce the economic strain felt by cities and institutions (Cole & Donley, 1990). Although there was controversy surrounding the practice, it represents the way that informal adoption, especially of older children, was commonly practiced in the late 19th century (Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio, & Barth, 2000).

Adoption in the 20th Century

By the turn of the 20th century, most states created adoption legislation. Although the formal practice of adoption during this time did involve the permanent severing of the biological relationship, there was not an emphasis on confidentiality. Court records were open and court hearings were informal (Avery, 1998). Concern was focused mainly on ensuring that placements were adequately investigated and supervised (Sokoloff, 1993). Based largely on the opinions of social workers and adoptive parents, Minnesota became the first state to enact a sealed records law in 1917, thereby institutionalizing adoption secrecy. Original secrecy practices, however, were not intended to keep information between biological and adoptive parents anonymous, "...but to shield the adoption proceedings from public scrutiny. These statutes barred all persons from inspecting the files and records on adoption except for the parties to the adoption and their attorneys" (Hollinger, 1993). Nonetheless, by 1929, every state in the country had adoption statutes, and by 1950, most had passed confidentiality legislation that denied all parties access to the adoption records, including the adopting parties (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998).

The move to make adoption completely anonymous was spurred, at least in part, by social workers in child-placing agencies wanting to remove the stigma of illegitimacy from adopted children. This practice coincided with an increase in the adoption of infants. Prior to the 1920s, the formal adoption of infants was rare because infant formula was not widely available and there were strong societal prejudices about heredity and the possibility of "bad blood" from poor or immigrant families (Cole & Donley, 1990). Informal adoption within extended families and minority groups was

more common (Benet, 1976). However, following World War I there was a low birth rate and large numbers of White couples interested in adopting healthy White infants. The number of adoption agencies increased in number in response to a growing black market of illegal adoptions, and states created stricter regulations (Baran & Pannor, 1990). By the 1950s, there were practices in place to provide infertile couples with infants who were considered nearly perfect, as well as to closely screen applicants because of the disproportionate ratio of interested adopters to adoptees.

The emphasis on providing infants for adults rather than on providing homes and parents for children during the decades following World War II was also correlated with extreme efforts taken to “match” infants and parents (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998). Newborns were routinely put in pre-adoptive “study homes” for approximately 6 months in order to perform health and psychological testing to determine the fitness of the child for the particular parents (Cole & Donley, 1990). Efforts were also taken to provide the new parents with an experience as close to having a biological child as possible. “The adopted child was ‘reborn’ as a child of the new family with a new identity and a new identification in the form of a birth certificate, exactly the same as if the child was born to them” (Baran & Pannor, 1990, p. 321).

The practice of matching infants with parents continued unabated until the 1970s when a number of societal changes influenced adoption practices. Overall, there was an increase in the number of infertile married couples seeking to adopt and a decrease in the number of infants available for adoption. The decrease in available healthy White infants is correlated with four main factors: the greater accessibility to abortion after the *Roe v. Wade* case in 1973, more reliable forms of birth control, the lessening of the

stigma of illegitimate birth and single parenting, and the availability of social welfare programs for single poor mothers (Sokoloff, 1993). This decrease led infertile couples to seek other sources for having children, particularly alternative means of reproduction, adoption of infants through independent sources, and adoption of infants and older children of other races, from other countries, or with special needs.

As major social changes altered the demographics of adoption, the concept of openness emerged in three related ways. First, many clinical professionals expressed concern that adolescent and adult adoptees had specific psychological problems related to their identity development and the secrecy of adoption (Baran & Pannor, 1993). Second, adult adoptees became increasingly vocal about their right to knowledge about their heritage and background, and succeeded in changing statutes in many states to open sealed records. "Between 1978 and 1990 at least 21 states enacted mandatory disclosure statutes requiring adoption agencies or intermediaries to provide adoptive parents with non-identifying information about an adopted child's health, education, and family background" (Avery, 1998, pp. 64-65). Third, as fewer infants were available for adoption, the supply and demand in the adoption market became more favorable to the biological mother who was able to wait for families agreeing to an open adoption, if that was her desire (Bachrach, Adams, Sambrano, & London, 1990; Churchman, 1986). This early concept of openness took place with independent adoptions, although by the mid-1980s, some researchers advocated for open adoption as standard practice in both independent and agency adoptions, and others argued that the practice was inappropriate and unhealthy under all circumstances (Kraft, Palombo, Woods, Mitchell, & Schmidt, 1985a; Pannor & Baran, 1984).

Corresponding to the societal changes of more couples wanting to adopt and fewer healthy White infants, there were growing numbers of infants and children living in foster care due to abuse or neglect, and consequently waiting for adoptive homes (Pecora et al., 2000). In some states the majority of children freed for adoption were considered special needs. The increase in the number of children in foster care is related to several factors: the institutionalization of voluntary and mandatory child abuse reporting legislation, beliefs in the intergenerational nature of abuse (and therefore increased likelihood of removing children from their parents), and social upheavals such as poverty and drug abuse (Schene, 1998). Additionally, older children, or children with special needs were originally believed to be unadoptable because of the prevailing view that only healthy, White infants would meet the desires of potential adoptive parents. Therefore, while more children went into foster care, few left in a timely manner.

The concern about “foster care drift,” the phrase coined to describe the experience of many children who grew up in foster care and moved from one foster placement to another, led directly to the special needs adoption movement in the 1960s and 1970s, and subsequent national child welfare legislation (McKenzie, 1993). The goals of the movement were to create more permanent adoptive homes for children and to demonstrate that age, race, and disability did not have to be impediments to successful adoption. Indeed, by the mid-1980s there were fewer children in foster care, children waited less time for permanent homes, more children with special needs experienced adoption, and more postadoption services, such as counseling and federal financial assistance were provided to adoptive families (Rosenthal, 1993). However, beginning in the mid-1980s a serious drug epidemic brought dramatic numbers of

infants and young children into the child welfare system. Between 1986 and 1989, there was a 28% increase in the number of children in foster care nationally (McKenzie). This trend continued in the 1990s, and has therefore increased lengths of stay in foster care, and lowered the proportion of children who experience permanent placements.

The open adoption and special needs adoption movements began at relatively the same time, yet little attention was paid to the application of openness to foster care adoptions. In fact, Schulman and Behrman (1993) write: "...the question of whether adoption shall be open or closed is really moot because older-child adoptions are clearly 'open' in most instances, and independent adoptions, which now handle the majority of infant adoptions, are characteristically open" (p. 14). This narrow view that pre-adoptive identifying information or contact solely defines an adoption as 'open' fails to recognize that openness can, and often does, involve a process beginning prior to adoption and evolving over the course of many years. A historical view of adoption illustrates the ways in which the themes of openness and age at adoption are not contemporary issues: the concept of adoption secrecy and adopting children as infants only emerged during the 20th century. Until then, it was most common to adopt older children through informal, open means. However, it is also clear that many of the societal issues that are prominent today influence the ways in which adoption is practiced.

Open Adoption: The Clinical Controversy

Arguments supporting the use of open adoption from the beginning of the adoptive placement discuss the proposed effects on each participant in the adoption triad: adoptive parents, biological parents, and adopted children. Reitz and Watson

(1992) propose a definition of adoption that supports the continuing societal change toward openness, and respects inherent differences and the notion of family continuity:

We define “adoption” as a means of providing some children with security and meeting their developmental needs by legally transferring ongoing parental responsibilities from their birth parents to their adoptive parents; recognizing that in so doing we have created a new kinship network that forever links those two families together through the child, who is shared by both. In adoption, as in marriage, the new legal family relationship does not signal the absolute end of one family and the beginning of another, nor does it sever the psychological tie to an earlier family. Rather, it expands the family boundaries of all those who are involved (p. 11).

Many of the arguments in support of openness for adoptive parents are phrased, however, in terms of the negative effects of closed adoption. For example, the secrecy of confidential adoption is believed to relate to an unhealthy denial by adoptive parents of the real differences between themselves and biological parents (Kirk, 1984). Kirk advocates for honest communication in the adoptive family system, which lessens the potential for difficulties adopted children may experience, and reduces the tendency of adoptive parents to blame any difficult behaviors or characteristics of the child on the biological parents. Openness is also believed to ease adoptive parents’ fears. Baran and Pannor (1993), clinical social workers and longtime advocates for openness, state that “the ghosts of the birthparents, inherent in the closed system, are ever present, and may lead to the fear that these parents will reclaim the child and that the child will love these parents more than the adoptive parents” (p. 121).

Openness is also postulated to benefit biological parents, by helping them to cope with their feelings of loss, mourning, grief, and guilt (Pannor & Baran, 1984). Open adoption gives them some amount of control in the adoption decision, and allows them to participate in the placement of their child with adoptive parents (Berry, 1993). The most significant beneficiary of open adoption, however, is believed to be the adopted child. Openness is purported to reduce the identity conflicts and confusion, which adopted children in closed adoptions often experience in adolescence (Kirk, 1984). Additionally, honest, clear information, and in some cases actual contact, eliminates the need for adopted children to search for their birthparents and heritage. "Advocates of open adoption believe that knowledge of one's past is a basic human need and that emotional problems may result when this knowledge is denied" (Curtis, 1986; Grotevant & McRoy, 1998, p. 7).

Opponents of open adoption, on the other side of the controversy, discuss the risks of the practice on the members of the adoption triad. Some of the difficulties that adoptive parents are believed to experience in open adoptions include fear of lack of entitlement to the child, difficulties with the bonding process, and accompanying insecurity that the biological parent will try to reclaim the child (Kraft, Palombo, Woods, Mitchell, & Schmidt, 1985b). Additionally, some professionals worry about the burden that the relationship with the biological parent imposes on the adoptive family, especially in cases where the biological mother is an adolescent (Churchman, 1986; Silber & Dorner, 1989;).

“Adoption has shaped my life through the losses experienced by my birth mother and by my adoptive parents. It shaped my life as I tried, all alone, to figure it out. No one would talk. No one would explain. My questions were unanswered. My adolescence was so difficult—wanting to please my parents but having to please myself... needing to know myself.”

-- Joyce Maguire Pavao

In the case of the biological mother who relinquishes her child to the adoptive family, opponents of openness argue that it prevents her from closure with the grieving process, rather than facilitating it (Kraft et al., 1985a). They also state that the promise of further contact with the child may encourage some to relinquish when they otherwise would not, and hold false hopes about the relationship (Berry, 1991). Finally, as in the case of the proposed benefits of openness, most opponents believe that the adopted child is at the greatest risk of harm with the practice. Kraft et al. believe that continued contact with the biological parents interferes with the bonding process between the adoptive parents and child. Therefore, while it may be more natural for an older child to continue contact with biological parents, doing so may prevent the child from truly integrating into the new family. Some argue that rather than easing the identity confusion often apparent in adolescence, openness will only contribute to it (Blotcky, Looney, & Grace, 1982). Overall, it is important to highlight the fact that most of the arguments for and against the practice of openness are based on anecdotal rather than empirical evidence, which has been slow in coming.

When such a placement occurs, it may be of particular value to the child to have ongoing contact with birth relatives in order to help dispel any notion of rejection by her racial or ethnic group. Understanding why an adoption plan was made can help the child resist the misperception that the adoption was based on personal rejection. Openness and contact can also help dispute society's stereotypes of birth parents of color as either drug users, "welfare queens" hoping to get financial support, or sexually irresponsible people.

Having a connection to her birth family will increase your child's sense of entitlement to her cultural heritage while at the same time offering a terrific way to learn cultural cues and to develop a sense of ethnic belonging. It is important to remember, however, that birth parents should not be made to feel obligated to be the child's only racial role model.

Research on Open Adoption

In the late 1980s, adoption researchers began to empirically examine the issue of openness and contact following adoption placement using small samples of families in independent adoptions. While findings from early studies on open adoption are mixed, they generally point to the benefits of the practice. Most adoptive parents who have been studied report that they are satisfied with having an open adoption (Etter, 1993; Gross, 1993; McRoy & Grotevant, 1991) and that the more open the adoption, the more "entitled" they feel toward their child (Belbas, 1987; Iwanek, 1987; McRoy, Grotevant, & White, 1988; Siegel, 1993). Findings also reveal that some adoptions which began with agreements for limited contact evolved to incorporate regular face-to-face meetings or telephone calls (McRoy et al.), and that adoptive parents practicing increased openness have higher levels of self-disclosure, empathy, respect, and regard (Mendenhall, Grotevant, & McRoy, 1996).

Other findings from empirical studies warn of harmful effects of openness in adoptions on all members of the adoption triad. Some adoptees, for instance, have been found to experience confusion about their identity, adoptive parents to have

trouble forming attachments with their adopted children, and biological parents to experience elongated periods of grieving (Kraft et al., 1985a, 1985b; Partridge, Hornby, & McDonald, 1986). The discrepancy in findings from these early studies is likely due to the fact that most have used very small sample sizes and have been cross-sectional, examining the effects of openness at only one point in time.

Grotevant, McRoy, Elde, and Fravel (1994) interviewed 190 adoptive families and 169 biological mothers, 4 and 12 years post adoption. The researchers differentiated five levels of openness and found that variations existed within all levels of openness. Grotevant and his colleagues concluded that there is a need for adoptive and biological parents to develop a mutually agreed-upon level of openness appropriate to their unique circumstances. In addition, they suggest that rather than perceiving adoption as a discrete event, it may be more accurately viewed as an arrangement or circumstance that changes with time, depending on the needs and desires of members of the adoption triad.

In early analyses of data from the California Long Range Adoption Study (CLAS), Berry (1991) analyzed data from 1,296 adoptive families about the practice of open adoption 2 years after placement, and found that most adoptions were open in some form, and that the majority of adoptive parents were satisfied with the level of openness of their adoption. Additionally, Berry found that adoptive parents had more positive impressions of their children's biological parents when there was contact, and that the behavior of children in open adoptions was rated more positively by adoptive parents than children in closed adoptions. Despite these positive findings, some adoptive parents reported being uncertain about the long-term impact of openness on their

adopted children and families. This study combined foster parent and nonfoster parent adoptions, but because there were substantial differences in their experiences (e.g., some foster parent adoptions were by relatives who had nearly daily contact with biological parents), future analyses of the CLAS data separated the groups.

In a follow-up of the CLAS sample, Berry et al. (1998) studied 764 nonfoster parent, primarily infant, adoptions 4 years after placement. In almost half of the adoptions the amount of postadoption contact between adoptive parents and/or the adopted child, and the biological parents had either decreased or stopped altogether. This was usually at the request of the biological parent(s) and most common when the adoptive parent(s) chose an open adoption based on the recommendation or insistence of the adoption agency involved. When contact was ongoing, about half of the families had contact with biological parents and half had contact with other biological relatives—including siblings, grandparents, and aunts and uncles. Most adoptive parents in the study (95% of those with open adoptions and 89% of those with closed adoptions) reported high levels of satisfaction with their adoption. No correlation was found between levels of satisfaction and the extent of openness.

Adoptions of children previously in foster care necessitate considerations for adoption practice that typically do not exist in neonate and nonfoster parent adoptions. Among these are the age and developmental level of the child at adoption, reasons for relinquishment from the biological parents, and the relationship between the foster and the biological parents prior to adoption (Berry, 1991). Children adopted from foster care are likely to have had a prior relationship with their biological families, which must be examined when planning for adoption.

In the only prospective longitudinal study to focus expressly on openness and contact among adoptions of foster children, Frasch, Brooks, and Barth (2000) surveyed 231 adoptive families in the third follow-up of the CLAS study. Most importantly, and supporting the work of McRoy et al. (1988), they found that the practice of openness continued to be an evolving process for most adoptive families 8 years following the adoptive placement. This study, however, provided a unique examination of the course that foster care adoptive families follow with respect to openness and contact. Whereas overall contact between adoptive and biological families decreased in the years immediately following adoption, in general it stabilized in subsequent years. This was true for contact between adoptive and biological parents and between adoptive parents and other biological relatives. Contact between adopted children and their biological parents was rare 4 years after placement and continued to be uncommon 4 years later. However, in 1997, 8 years postplacement, approximately 1 in 5 children in the sample reportedly had contact with a biological relative other than a parent.

Although changes in contact were apparent for the sample study by Frasch et al. (2000), there was also remarkable consistency in most arrangements. Almost 40% of families began with a closed adoption and did not report contact with the biological family during the 8-year period. In contrast, just over 25% had contact with the biological family at or immediately after the placement and continued to have some form of contact with them. The remaining one third of families significantly changed their arrangement, either starting contact when there was none or stopping contact altogether. Upon close examination, it is clear that whether the adoption arrangement was always open or closed, or opened or closed after the placement occurred, most

adoptive parents were highly satisfied with their adoption experience and felt close to their adopted child. The findings highlight the importance of the early choices that individual adoptive and biological families make with respect to contact with the adopted child (Grotevant et al., 1994). If, as proponents of family continuity assert, continued contact with biological parents is a benefit for children, then early contact with biological family members should be encouraged.

Allison, a Chinese child, age 4, had been adopted by a White family as an infant. Allison's family was now in the process of adopting domestically. They were participating in an open adoption, and Marissa, the expectant mother, had come to stay with them for the last month of her pregnancy. Allison's parents had told her about the planned adoption but were concerned about how this process and the proximity of an expectant parent would affect Allison. One evening Allison asked her Dad, 'where is the baby going to go after Marissa has her?' Dad managed to change the subject and put Allison to bed without falling apart. He and his wife spent the rest of the evening discussing their plans about how to respond to her question. The next day, Mom and Dad asked Allison what she meant when she said she wanted to know where the baby was going. Allison explained that she wasn't sure if the baby was going to sleep with Marissa or with her parents or in her own room. Allison wanted to be sure the crib was in the right place before the baby came.

Frasch et al.'s (2000) study illuminates important issues about the amount and kind of communication occurring between adoptive and biological families in open adoptions, as well as the role adoptive parents play in controlling contact. In contrast to what some prospective adoptive parents might expect, the families in the study that practiced open adoption had on average very little communication with biological parents. Both 4 and 8 years following placement, the mean overall number of contacts was about three, and in-person contact occurred less than one time a year. Contact between adopted children and biological parents was also very rare. There were no differences in who initiated the contact, and almost all of the adoptive parents said they

felt they had control over the amount of contact they or their child had with the child's biological family.

Other findings from the Frasch et al. (2000) study reveal that adoptive parents' views of their child's biological parents were also important with respect to the practice of open and closed adoptions, an issue that is likely to be much more prominent in adoptions of children from the child welfare system. Adoptive parents were asked about their views of their child's biological parents. Of the parents who reported a positive view of the biological parents 4 years after placement, a significantly higher proportion had an open adoption 4 years later. Eight years post-placement, those in open adoptions were more likely to have an opinion, either positive or negative, than those in closed adoptions. Multivariate analysis of the effects of contact and views of the biological parents on the likelihood of having an open or closed adoption 8 years after placement substantiate this finding. Having neither a positive nor negative view of the child's biological mother increased the likelihood of having a closed adoption, while having a positive or mostly positive view of the biological mother increased the likelihood of having an open adoption. This suggests that the views adoptive parents have about their children's biological parents may play an important role in determining openness. Conversely, it also is possible that the amount and type of contact adoptive parents have with their child's biological parents and other relatives influenced the views they have of them. In cases involving adoptions of foster children, child maltreatment by a biological parent very likely occurred. Such knowledge may leave adoptive parents of foster children with reasons for concern about the ability of their child's biological parents to have positive interactions with their child.

While adoptive parents' views of their child's biological parents were meaningful, findings from Frasch et al.'s (2000) study indicated that the most powerful predictor of having a closed adoption 8 years after the adoption placement was lack of contact between the adoptive parents and the child's biological relatives, not including the biological parents. This suggests that there are alternative paths to contact between the child and biological parents, one of the most important being the maintenance of contact with the adopted children's biological family members. Other variables, such as contact with biological parents, the age of the child at placement, whether the child was adopted through a public or private agency, and the adoptive parents' view of the child's biological mother, did not appear to be as strongly associated with whether adoptions would be open or closed many years after the adoptive placement. These findings have important implications for both adoptive and biological families who value openness and desire ongoing contact.

While the long-term experience of families adopting children from foster care may be expected to differ significantly from that of families adopting neonates and children who have not been placed in foster care, the findings suggested that there might be more similarities than differences between the groups. Many of the children studied were adopted from foster care as infants. Older children, however, may have had relationships with their biological parents prior to relinquishment, and they and their adoptive parents may have greater interest in maintaining contact or involvement.

Some researchers and practitioners have expressed concerns about the impact of openness on adopted children's adjustment and overall development, and adoptive parents' feelings of entitlement to their child (Kraft et al., 1985a, 1985b, 1985c; Partridge

et al., 1986). The findings from the study by Frasch et al. (2000) did not directly support or disconfirm these fears. Yet, given the limited contact occurring in families with open adoptions, the wide range of significant influences in children's lives, and the high level of control adoptive parents maintained, it is unlikely that adopted children's development was detrimentally affected by openness alone or at all. No studies to date have directly examined the impact of openness on the adjustment psychosocial developmental outcomes of adoptive children and families. Barth and Berry (1988) did, however, examine openness and foster care adoption in their study of adoption disruptions. In the study of 120 families who adopted children 3 years old or older at placement, 79% of the adoptions were found to involve contact between children and their former caregivers, including former foster parents, biological parents, and other biological relatives. The researchers also found that whether the contact between the adopted children and their biological parents was perceived as helpful was most closely related to the adoptive parents' sense of control over the arrangement. In turn, adoptive parents' sense of control was found to determine their satisfaction with the open adoption arrangement.

Transracial Adoption

While the Frasch et al. (2000) study provides information about the kind and amount of contact occurring for adoptive families a number of years following placement, there continues to be a lack of understanding about the influence of openness on family life and dynamics, as well as the experience of subgroups of families. Additionally, although to date there is no research that directly addresses this topic, transracial adoptive families may have a different perspective or experience of openness and contact than

inracial families. In their study of the willingness of prospective White adopters to adopt Black children, Brooks and James (2003) found that those willing to adopt Black children were much more likely than their unwilling counterparts to have closed adoptions. The authors suggest that this finding could reveal that closed adoption is more appealing to some White parents considering adoption of a Black foster child if it is perceived as a way to eliminate the need for contact with the child's Black family and preadoptive community. This may provide some parents with a sense of assurance that ties to the child's birth family and community (and any expected negative influences of the family and/or community) are severed. Brooks and James point out that open adoptions have been touted as a way both to decrease the disruption that children experience when placed in out-of-home care and increase adoptions of children in foster care when parental rights have been terminated. Their findings suggest that further investigation is necessary in order to determine whether open adoptions, with regard to transracial adoptions, are a viable alternative for permanency for Black foster children. Further, their findings suggest that issues related to openness and contact may differ depending on whether an adoption is inracial or transracial.

ADOPTION SERVICES AND SUPPORTS

Parents of transracially adopted kids often ask, "Why is my child acting like that? Is it because of development? Adoption? Race? Something else?" In a society that values whiteness above all other shades, parents must help their children deal with the reality of racism but not become victims of it. They must acknowledge their child's need to deal with loss and anxiety caused by adoption, while at the same time fighting for the legitimacy and enduring status of the family. Given these demands, parents often wonder where to focus when confronting the usual challenges of life with children. Taking inventory of where an issue comes from may shed new light on how to handle it.

Overview

There is a small, but increasing literature on adoption services and supports that includes a focus on the need for both pre- and postadoption services, usage and helpfulness of informal and formal types of services and support, and suggestions of adopters regarding specific types of services and support needed. The growing adoption services literature has predominantly focused on description of postadoption services for special needs adoptees with several studies identifying adoptive parents' unmet service needs (Berry, 1990, Brooks, Allen, & Barth, 2002; Daly & Sobol, 1994; Lightburne & Pine, 1996; Marcenko & Smith, 1991). Most researchers agree on the need for more postadoption services as well as more in-depth preparation for adoption, including adoptee background information. More recently, studies have begun to examine service provision in relation to type of adoption (Berry, Barth, & Needell, 1996; Brooks et al.) as well as service utilization and usefulness (Brooks et al.).

Groze (1996) has identified three general types of supportive resources needed by pre-adoptive families: emotional support, informational support, and concrete aid. More recently, Barth and Miller (2001) suggest grouping adoption services into three categories: information/education, clinical services, and material support. Information and education includes literature, seminars, agency-based information about the adoption process, and adopted child and family background. Clinical services include individual, couple, and family counseling, and intensive crisis intervention or out-of-home placement. Material support includes adoption subsidy, health benefits, respite care, and financial support for intensive out-of-home placement.

Need for Adoption Services and Support

Several studies have emphasized the need for and use of supportive services for preparation of adoptive parents and to support the on-going challenges faced by parents throughout the adoptive life cycle. Kramer and Houston (1998) emphasize the importance of coordinated delivery systems for pre-adoptive families to enhance stability of adoptions of special needs children. Their study indicates that adoptive parents rely on both informal and formal supportive resources such as the adoption agency, access to family resource support specialists, and experienced “master” adoptive parents who act as mentors. Respondents identified health and medical problems, child development and education issues, and child behavior problems as key problems faced by adoptive parents. Parents reported use of formal supports for health and medical needs, child behavior problems, child development and education issues, informational needs regarding the child’s birth history, family adjustment, and assistance in accessing services. Informal support from immediate and extended family and friends related to child behavior problems, family adjustment, and acceptance from the community.

Multiple studies identify diverse unmet service needs (Berry, 1990; Brooks et al., 2002; Kramer & Houston, 1998; Lightburne & Pine, 1996; Marcenko & Smith, 1991; McDonald, Lieberman, Partridge, & Hornby, 1991; McDonald, Propp, & Murphy, 2001; Phillips, 1988; Rushton, 1989). McDonald et al. (2001) surveyed 159 parents 18-24 months postadoption from public child welfare. Using a 33-item checklist of services need and utilization, they found that 76% reported no problems with access to services. Of the 24% that indicated difficulty in obtaining services, the majority identified problems

obtaining medical services, support groups, financial assistance, and qualified child clinicians for mental health services. In addition, parents expressed a desire for more respite care services and greater responsiveness from child welfare agencies to family and child needs.

Brooks et al. (2002) studied 888 adoptive parents 8 years postadoption comparing adoption services use, helpfulness, and need by type of adoption. In this sample, fewer than 30% utilized most postadoption services, with a greater number of parents reporting use of psychoeducational resources, including reading materials and workshops on adoption. Regardless of type of adoption, parents reported a strong desire for information on their child's pre-adoptive history and ongoing educational resources to assist parenting efforts. Public agency adopters reported the greatest desire for clinical services, including support groups, individual counseling, and family therapy.

Services and Support in Special Needs Adoptions

Multiple studies have explored the need for services and support by those adopting special needs children. Rushton (1989) identified common problems of adoptive and foster parents in meeting the needs of these children based on limited supportive resources and a lack of quality in support services. In general, researchers agree on the need for financial subsidies, respite care, pre-adoption history, and skills training. In a review of the adoption services literature, Berry (1990) emphasizes the need for substantial preparation and support services for families adopting special needs children. She reports parent dissatisfaction with preparation services and highlights parent needs for child-specific information, clear identification of problem

areas, behavioral training, education about the long-range impact of child abuse, and knowledge of community resources. In addition, she encourages availability of support services throughout the adoptive family life cycle to assist in recruitment and stabilization of adoptive families.

Marcenko and Smith (1991) surveyed the postadoption service use and needs of 125 adoptive families with children with developmental disabilities. Families in this study reported poor access to basic family support, including respite services, life planning, and support groups. They found income to be correlated to level of service need with middle-income families demonstrating a greater likelihood of needing support groups and childcare than either lower- or higher-income families. Transracial adoptive families also reported a higher need for support services in comparison to inracial adoptive families. The research on families successfully parenting children with chronic disabilities emphasizes the importance of utilization of both informal and formal support systems (Groze, 1996; Kramer & Houston, 1998; Peterson, 1997). Finally, Peterson and Freundlich (2000) emphasize the importance of providing accurate information regarding health and birth history to adoptive parents with provision of written disclosure, and education about the limits on information gathering and disclosure.

PARENT RECOMMENDATIONS

A variety of parent recommendations for support services are found in the literature. Rosenthal, Groze, and Morgan (1996) indicate that minority families stress the importance of social support. Kramer and Houston (1998) report parents identifying a range of unmet service needs, including ongoing contact with the caseworker postadoption, assistance accessing and paying for nonagency services, counseling for

unique cultural needs of Black male children, family therapy, peer support groups, and financial support for child care. Parents in Scotland suggested a need for library resources, a list of community resources, written material explaining adoption to support pre-adoption discussion with extended family, psychoeducation on postadoption problems, support groups for adopted children, and legal consultation. McKenzie (1993) describes a need for mental health services that are sensitive to adoption issues such as trauma history and multiple placements, financial assistance at the same level as fostering a child, and use of videotraining for permanency and parenting skills available for home use.

Adoption Services, Helpfulness, and Satisfaction

Historically, most adoption services offered were postadoptive counseling requested by infertile White couples who adopted infants who had reached adolescence. More recently, services have included pre-adoptive information that assists adoptive families in parenting special needs children such as the adoptive child's birth history and psychoeducational information about the impact of various aspects of pre-adoptive history. Preparatory and postadoption services available to adoptive families vary across adoption type (Brooks et al., 2002). Parent reports of services satisfaction are inconsistent with some studies reporting high satisfaction with services for families adopting children with developmental disabilities (Marcenko & Smith, 1991) and other families with special needs children reporting dissatisfaction with adoption services (Berry, 1990; Brooks et al.).

Based upon a tri-state survey examining pre- and post-adoptive service needs of 562 adoptive families, Rosenthal et al., (1996) report financial and medical subsidies as

pivotal service needs. In addition, counseling and education issues, child development, and psychoeducation regarding future planning were found to be “very helpful”. Over 60% of families adopting children with behavioral problems who were not receiving respite services expressed a need for respite care. Not surprisingly, service needs were greater in families whose children exhibited behavior problems.

Hairston and Williams (1989) examined adoption services usage and helpfulness in Black adoptive families who adopted through private agencies in the U.S. Of the 60% who received parent group activities and 45% receiving counseling services, only about 42% found them helpful. Berry et al., (1996) examined over 1,000 adoptive parents comparing public, private, and independent agency services. Only 37% of the total sample received postplacement services. In addition, families adopting through public agencies reported higher utilization of social worker visits, counseling, and family therapy than either private or independent adopters whose rates of services utilization were similar. Pre-adoption services also differed across type of adoption with approximately one quarter of independent agency respondents reporting no services received as compared to 11% of public agency adopters and 4% of private agency adopters.

Understanding Adoption Services and Support Needs Using an Adoptive Life Cycle Framework

Interest in adoption as a moderating factor has led to consideration of issues specific to adoption and development within a life cycle framework. The adoption life cycle framework provides understanding of salient adoption issues over time incorporating a resiliency perspective, and combines generalized phases and

associated tasks of the life cycle framework (Carter & McGoldrick, 1980) as well as key tasks in each phase specific to adoptive families (Deacon, 1997; Hajal & Rosenberg, 1991; Rosenberg, 1992).

Everyday life will tell our children over and over that their family is “different.” For them, it will become a common experience to be confronted with challenges, direct or indirect, explicit or implied, to the authenticity of our families. Ours don’t look like other families; we have uncommon variety in our skin colors, hair types, facial characteristics, etc.

Our children don’t share a certain family nose; they don’t have the experience (so often annoying to those born into a family) of being met at family reunions with exclamations from distant relatives who joyously declare, “Oh my, you look just like your mother did when she was your age!” And so our children’s experience largely lacks many of the ordinary affirmations of belonging.

Pre-Adoption

Following approval, adopters face integration of a new member into the family. Rosenberg (1992) identifies a number of emotional processes related to the task of accepting the new family member, including continued mourning, initial adjustment to parenthood without the benefit of the gestation period present in biological births, accepting “ghosts” of the biological parents and their families as part of the new family structure, bonding, acceptance of psychological parenthood, realignment of extended family relationships to support acceptance of the nonbiological child, and addressing community attitudes toward adoption. Supportive services such as couple and family therapy may assist with the integration of loss, redefinition of family roles and identity as a parent, which in turn assists the bonding process. Information about the child’s pre-adoptive history and current special needs may also assist new adoptive parents in developing a sense of competency.

Postadoption

Immediately following the initial adoption process, parents begin to acknowledge adoption as a fact, including decisions about disclosure. There is an emotional testing of the relationship throughout the family system which includes facing others' response to the adoption (Rosenberg, 1992). Parents must decide about disclosure to the adoptee as well as others and decision-making may be difficult. Concurrently, young adoptees are testing limits at the same time both parent and child struggle with a sense of permanency. A significant challenge during this stage is maintaining commitment and building family identification (Hajal & Rosenberg, 1991). Compounding the issue of permanency is the frequently long waiting period for adoption finalization. Families may need to increase use of both informal and formal support. Specialized postadoption services, such as adoptive parent education/support groups and specialized reading, are often needed during this stage. Transactionally, the parents' continuing commitment to the child helps to create a sense of safety and belonging in the child and, at the same time, validates the adopter's sense of competence as a parent.

At the same time, their lives are filled with lots of occasions when family difference evokes the strongest notice. When you pick your child up from school, there's the familiar surprised remark, "Is that your mom? But she's White!" At the park, while you sit tucked next to your toddler, digging in the sand, a friendly stranger asks, "Which child is yours?"

The Preschool-Age Child

During the adoptive life cycle, there is a continuing process of acknowledging adoption status with those outside the family as well as within the family. Because transracially adopted children are racially different, families may not explain the obvious

whereas those with children of similar phenotype struggle with whom, what, and when to discuss the adoption. Adoption disclosure (to others and the child) is often a debated issue. Children of this age think concretely, and with the process of magical thinking, may develop confusion about what their adoption status means. In addition, as preschool-age adoptees attempt to exert control, their parents may experience concerns regarding their child's inheritance of birth family characteristics (e.g., aggression) and misunderstand or misinterpret normal behavioral development (Rosenberg, 1992). Postadoptive services may include formal support for the immediate and extended family in preparing to share adoption status. Psychoeducational services can enhance parent understanding of child development. Clinical services can provide professional evaluation of possible developmental/behavioral problems. Knowledge of the child's pre-adoptive history, including family history, will lessen confusion about the source of potential problems. Adoption subsidy may be needed to support provision of needed clinical/medical services.

But we are family, nonetheless. Just as we want to help our children develop tools to enable their acceptance by their racial group, we also should remember to provide the tools that help demonstrate and strengthen our acknowledgement within the family of one another as family. We must act like family, with our own unique and exclusive family ways of doing things. If we pay a little attention, we can discover, identify, create, or develop unique acts that reveal and affirm our belonging to one another. These family rituals are the bridges by which children can connect to the family in a way no outsider can.

The Latency-Age Child

A major task during latency is the extension of the acknowledgement of adoption as a fact of family life to the community. Related to this task is the challenge of the

adoptee's emerging wish or fear of contact with the biological parent and the adoptive parent's sense of competency, continuing child concerns of being "returned", and responding to particular community reactions to the child's status as an adoptee (Rosenberg, 1992). The ongoing challenge is to maintain commitment in spite of the normative and adoption-specific strains in the parent-child relationship. It is during this time that adoptees may create fantasies about their biological families. These fantasies exacerbate fears present in both adoptee and adoptive parents (Hajal & Rosenberg, 1991). The adoptee's goals include development of competence, integration of awareness of being adopted (if disclosed), and affirmation of the permanency of the adoptive family. Adoptees must process normative ambivalence and related anxiety toward both birth and adoptive parents and struggle with self-esteem based on feelings of abandonment. A strong sense of parental competence and a strong family identity support the conflicted parent-child relationship and their need for attachment and commitment. Particularly in special needs adoption where adoptee behavior problems increase the risk of adoption disruption, clinical services may be important to support parental sense of competency and family identity that lead to ongoing commitment. Early preparation, including development of appropriate behavioral expectations of those with a high-risk, pre-adoptive history, and education about available resources to support these challenges, may support ongoing commitment in the adoptive family system.

The Adolescent

In adolescence, primary tasks challenging adoptive parents include increasing flexibility of family boundaries, acceptance of the psychological bond as well as the

child's identity influenced by both their biological foundation and adoptive family experience, and maintenance of clear sexual boundaries. Associated with these tasks, adoptive parents must emotionally integrate separation-individuation issues supporting independence, incorporate understanding of the nuclear adoptive family as well as triadic family, support the child's interest in his or her biological family to enhance identity, accept their child's integrative process of sexual identity as well as images of biological vs. adoptive parents, and support family-wide acceptance of the adoption yet again (Rosenberg, 1992). Family stability is clearly challenged with a realignment of relationships and questioning of attachments and allegiances (Hajal & Rosenberg, 1991). The adoptive family can experience adolescents' pursuit of autonomy and interest in their biological family as abandonment. A major task, then, is maintenance of flexible boundaries that balance normative pursuit of autonomy and continuing need for a supportive structure that emphasizes commitment. The adoptive family's ability to flex boundaries and incorporate the triadic family influence while maintaining security and safety promotes re-acceptance of the adoption. Psychoeducational and clinical services (support groups for parents and adolescents and family therapy) offer professional guidance in issues specific to the adoptive family system during this critical phase. Material services will continue to be of importance, especially for those needing respite care, health benefits, and possible out-of-home placement for those with extreme behavioral difficulties.

Don't be thrown off balance by the word ritual. For some people, ritual has to do with religious practice. That's not what we mean (though participation in religious activities can certainly be one of your family rituals). We're talking about the stuff you do that is, or can be, woven into the fabric of your everyday lives. The type of activity doesn't matter—whether it's that you all roll your eyes together when Dad goes on his "silly" kick or that every child participates in making a shared present at holidays (despite their groaning,) or that you have your own special ways of waving goodbye—just make sure that you are doing things that suit you, that are unique to your family, that allow for significant interaction among family members, and that your children come to understand that they are unique to your family, shared by none other.

The Young Adult

Young adult adoptees need to be secure in their adoptive family commitment as they begin their physical separation from the family unit. Integral to this task is the integration of the search for biological parents while reaffirming ties with the adoptive family. During the time, young adult adoptees also enter into intimate relationships and face issues of their own ability to reproduce and the opportunity for genetic linkage (Hajal & Rosenberg, 1991; Rosenberg, 1992). Clinical services may be of particular value in supporting a healthy family separation. Informational and educational services in regard to the impact of maltreatment on intimate relationships may assist adoptees in understanding relational difficulties they may experience.

Why build a family ritual?

- ***Just for fun!***
- ***To reinforce family ties***
- ***To celebrate family history***
- ***To strengthen family identity***
- ***To create memories***

-- from Steinberg & Hall

The Adopted Adult

During adulthood, the issue of adoption disclosure re-emerges, as well as the importance of integration of biological children of the adoptee into the adoptive family system. There is a shifting of generational roles and reality of discontinuity in bloodline occurring within the adoptive parents' developmental process of facing their own mortality (Rosenberg, 1992). Supportive services that enhance boundary flexibility contribute to the family's ability to manage change.

The eco-transactional model of resiliency and understanding of these processes within the adoptive life cycle framework can provide a foundation from which to approach intervention. Pre- and postadoption services supporting acceptance, clear and flexible boundaries, integration processes, and commitment to adaptation throughout the adoptive family life cycle are thought to be essential to support positive adaptation.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

General

Small Group

1. Develop a list of questions regarding your particular unit to be discussed with your supervisor/other staff. Consider each of the areas below.

Large Group: True/False Handout

1. Anyone can adopt transracially. (F)
2. Emotional issues of transracially adopted children are different from children of same-race adoptions. (T)
3. Families adopt a child, not their cultural heritage. (F)
4. Parents need not know about a child's cultural/racial identity to consider adoption. (F)
5. Black families do not adopt children. (F)

6. Black groups (organizations, communities, professionals) prefer that a Black child remain in foster care than be adopted transracially. (F)

Child Welfare Overview

Large Group Discussion

1. What is your immediate reaction to the statistics we've read about so far?
2. How does this information fit or not fit with your previous understanding of how children enter the child welfare system? (Facilitator make a list group can see.)
3. What do you think about the link between poverty and child abuse? Are poor children more likely to be maltreated, or are they just more likely to be reported and noticed?
4. Why are Black children more often victims of maltreatment?
5. What are some of the factors that account for the huge discrepancies between the length of stay in out-of-home care between states and regions?
6. Take a look at the Language of Race definitions. Identify any you would redefine. How and why?

Child Welfare Legislation

Large Group Discussion

1. Identify the diverse range of factors that would affect placement decisions.
2. What do you think might be the unintended consequences of MEPA?

Small Group Discussion

1. Discuss the pros and cons of racial matching. What difficulties do you expect in applying the law as defined in MEPA considering the lack of clarity regarding **when** to apply race as a placement factor?
2. Identify multiple avenues to recruitment of Black, Latino, and Asian families. Explore the strengths and limitations of each approach.
3. Discuss the pros and cons of statutes referring to openness and contact. Choose a speaker to present main points to the larger group.

Race and Adoption

Large Group Discussion

1. Identify barriers to recruitment of families of color as they relate to your organization. (Facilitator: Consider such aspects as systemic racism present in procedures/guidelines, diversity within the organization (especially those in management positions), fees, negative public perception of the agency, rigid standards, general lack of recruitment activities, poor publicity; See Crumbley, 1999.)
2. What might be some of the common misperceptions by nonfamily members about families' motivations for adopting transracially? (For example, White parents seen as "saints," or as a guilt response by Whites toward past racism). Discuss how you can prepare transracial adoptive families for others' response to their decision to adopt transracially. What can you tell them to say and do? Be specific.

Group leaders: Providing a brief vignette may be helpful. For example, a vignette offered by Crumbley (1999):

Anna is a beautiful 8-year-old Latina girl who has been placed as a foster child in your Black family for the last year and a half. She has little contact with her biological family. As soon as Anna's parental rights are terminated, you hope to adopt her. One afternoon, an elderly neighbor, Thelma, stops by to drop off some things for an upcoming church fundraiser. Thelma is the "eyes and ears" of the neighborhood, and always seems to make your business her business. Your three children, including Anna, are playing in the room across the hall. After a rather lengthy visit, Thelma stops by the front hallway on her way out to admire each of the newly hung school pictures. In her usual booming voice, she says, "What lovely photos. But why is Anna's here among all your family portraits? She's not a real member of your family."

3. Transracial adoptive families also express a range of experiences about extended family responses to the decision to adopt transracially. What might those be? How can transracial adoptive families be prepared for both initial and long-term responses?

Small Group Discussion

1. Identify ways you can address barriers to recruitment of families of color within an organization. (For example, recruitment must be ongoing with flexible screening, make fees reasonable, and provide explanations for fees.)

2. It is important to help transracial adoptive parents advocate for their children in their communities and schools. What are some of the challenges parents might encounter in the schools?
3. Transracial adoptive parents struggle with how to prepare their children to face racist behavior in our society. How can transracial adoptive parents help their children respond to other children who comment on differences such as parent race, hair type, or language style?
4. Transracial adoptive parents are aware of White prejudice against Blacks. However, they also describe experiences of prejudice of Blacks against Whites. What can transracial adoptive families do to prepare their children for this aspect of racism? How can you help transracial adoptive families access their child's culture and/or learn about their heritage?
5. What surprises you about the outcomes of transracially adopted children? What fits with your expectations? How do you think these aspects of your own thinking might impact your interactions with transracial adoptive families?

Openness and Contact

Large Group Discussion

1. (Before info re: openness/contact): Do you support open adoption? (Create list of Yes/No and Why). Then, present info and do again.
2. Differentiate pros and cons for open adoption based upon age of child:
 - Adopted at birth
 - Adopted age 2-4
 - Adopted 5 years and older
3. What surprises you about the outcomes of children in open adoptions? What information you've read or heard is consistent with your expectations? How does this awareness impact how you might discuss openness with potential adopters?

Small Group Discussion

1. Identify some of the reasons transracial adoptive parents might be uncomfortable with open adoption? Why might they want an open adoption?
2. In large group, discuss how personal biases regarding their child's biological family might influence feelings about openness. Then, in small group have members discuss: How can you help transracial adoptive families explore their own biases about their child's biological family in order to better understand their feelings about open adoption?

Services and Supports

Large Group Discussion

1. What ways would you encourage/help families seek out and integrate their child's culture of origin into daily life?

Small Group Discussion

1. Consider the adoptive family life cycle and apply it to transracial adoptive families. Identify and discuss issues you think are specific to transracial adoptive families as they relate to the developmental tasks identified in the adoptive life cycle.
2. Develop a list of topics that would be important to share with potential transracial adopters.
3. Develop a list of topics that you would incorporate into a postadoption support group for transracial adoptive families. Be sure to include issues around racism in each.

CHAPTER II

**NORMATIVE DEVELOPMENT IN
TRANSRACIAL ADOPTIVE FAMILIES:
AN INTEGRATION OF THE LITERATURE AND IMPLICATIONS
FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF A THEORETICAL
FRAMEWORK**

CHAPTER II

NORMATIVE DEVELOPMENT IN TRANSRACIAL ADOPTIVE FAMILIES: AN INTEGRATION OF THE LITERATURE AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

INSTRUCTIONAL GUIDE

Research on transracial adoptive families is limited by its overreliance on atheoretical research and the examination of children as the primary unit of analysis. Additionally, there is a significant lack of integration of approaches and empirical findings from disparate yet relevant literatures. To better understand transracial adoption, this chapter reviews and integrates these literatures, and offers a conceptual framework that can be used to examine the normative development of transracial adoptive families.

While the previous chapter examined the macro context related to transracial adoptive families, including broad issues and topics, this chapter focuses on understanding the micro context of the child and family. It provides a theoretical integration of literature in the field and sets the stage for better understanding and interpreting the findings discussed in the next chapter.

Contents

The following article comprises the majority of this chapter's material:

Frasch, K. M., & Brooks, D. (2003). Normative development in transracial adoptive families: An integration of the literature and implications for the construction of a theoretical framework. *Families in Society, 84*(2), 201-212.

It covers:

- Identity development
- Racial and ethnic identity development
- Adoption understanding, identity, and adjustment
- Family life cycle theory
- Adoptive family life cycle
- Transracial adoption
- Normative development in transracial adoptive families and implications for the construction of a theoretical framework
- Implications and conclusion
- Questions for discussion and reflection

This chapter is intended to be used in its entirety, rather than pulled out as separate sections. Instructors are strongly encouraged to use this chapter as background reading for students or workers in the field, especially prior to the themes discussed in the next chapter. Questions for discussion are included at the end of the chapter to facilitate small- or whole-group discussions, or simply to provoke further thinking on the topic.

This chapter addresses the following competencies for public child welfare practice:

- Ethnic Sensitive and Multicultural Practice - 1.1, 1.2, 1.4, 1.5
- Core Child Welfare Practice - 2.5, 2.12, 2.14, 2.15
- Human Behavior and the Social Environment - 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4
- Culturally Competent Child Welfare Practice - 5.4
- Advanced Child Welfare Practice - 6.6
- Human Behavior and the Child Welfare Environment - 7.6
- Child Welfare Policy, Planning, and Administration - 8.8, 8.9

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Large Group

1. How might transracial adoptive families experience discrimination?
2. How does racism influence identity?
3. How would you know a family was ready to adopt transracially?

Small Group

1. Identify and discuss the skills you think transracial adoptive parents need to have. Then come together in large group and share.

Facilitator: Consider the following recommendations made by Crumbley (1999):

- Ability to validate and acknowledge losses and grief;
- Anticipates testing by the child;
- Can allow child to pursue, search, and maintain both racial and family identities;
- Has a plan for integration of child's racial, cultural, and familial identities;
- Can acknowledge and work to change mutual fears, prejudices, and stereotypes;
- Can educate about and interact with the child's culture of origin and family.

To do so, adoptive families need to:

- Have a sense of their own values and attitudes about racial and cultural differences of others and where attitudes came from;
- Understand why/how racism, prejudice, and discrimination exist and operate; how to counteract it;
- Have the ability to attach and empathize with those of different racial, socioeconomic, and cultural origins;
- Be able to provide child with positive racial and cultural experiences/information;
- Be able to prepare child for contact with racial/cultural community;
- Reside in a community that provides child exposure to same-race adults, peer relations, and role models;
- Be able to participate in cross-cultural activities;
- Have knowledge that family will become an interracial family;

- Have tolerance and ability to manage others' responses (prejudice/discrimination);
- Be interested in and develop skills/resources to meet child's dietary, skin, hair, and health needs;
- Balance appreciation for child's differences with need for child to be a "full" member of the family.

Questions for Self-Reflection

(Participants can be asked to spend 10 minutes writing a self-reflective response to each of the questions below):

1. Is transracial adoption in the best interests of children?
2. What are your views about providing tax and financial incentives for adoption of children with special needs?
3. What are the reasons you think parents choose to adopt children of a different race?
4. If you adopted a child, would you want an open or closed adoption? Why? How might your perceptions impact your professional practice?
5. What practice behaviors might you change as a result of this training?
6. How might your personal views of transracial vs. inracial adoption impact your understanding of the barriers to recruitment of adoptive families of color?

Additional Options for Self-Awareness

1. Have participants do 10 minutes of writing in response to one or more of the boxed quotes found in Chapter I or II.

Readings to Consider These Issues Further

1. Cohen, E. P. (2003). Framework for culturally competent decision-making in child welfare. *Child Welfare, 82*(2), 143-155.
2. Mederos, F., & Woldegiorgis, I. (2003). Beyond cultural competence: What child protection managers need to know and do. *Child Welfare, 82*(2), 125-142.

CHAPTER III

THEMES FROM IN-PERSON INTERVIEWS

CHAPTER III THEMES FROM IN-PERSON INTERVIEWS

INSTRUCTIONAL GUIDE

This chapter provides findings from in-depth, in-person interviews conducted with 12 transracial adoptive families in Northern and Southern California. All families have at least one child over the age of 10, and in 7 of the 12 families, an adopted child was also interviewed. Interviews with families covered four main topics: adoption history/family background, openness and contact, adoptive family issues and development, and services and support. The chapter begins with a short description of the participants and then discusses themes related to the interview topics. There is a heavy reliance on the participants' own words and stories where possible.

Contents

- The interview guide (page 91)
- The participants (page 92)
- Background for adoption (page 94)
- Children's understanding of their adoption (page 100)
- Openness and contact (page 104)
- Race and the transracial adoptive family (page 124)
- Services and supports (page 147)
- Discussion and implications (page 159)
- Questions for discussion (page 166)

Instructors are encouraged to use this chapter in a range of ways to suit their needs. Permission is granted for this chapter to be copied and distributed to students for independent reading or classroom use. The individual discussions about particular

themes can be pulled out as separate topics for instruction or the chapter can be used in its entirety. Questions are included at the end to facilitate small- or whole-group discussions.

This chapter can be used to foster the following competencies for public child welfare work:

- Ethnic Sensitive and Multicultural Practice - 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4,
- Core Child Welfare Practice - 2.5, 2.12, 2.14, 2.15,
- Human Behavior and the Social Environment - 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5,
- Workplace Management - 4.1, 4.3,
- Culturally Competent Child Welfare Practice - 5.4,
- Advanced Child Welfare Practice - 6.3, 6.6,
- Human Behavior and the Child Welfare Environment - 7.6,
- Child Welfare Policy, Planning, and Administration - 8.9.

INTRODUCTION

During the Spring and Summer of 2003, researchers from the University of Southern California contacted and interviewed 12 transracial adoptive families in California. In all cases, an adoptive parent or parents were interviewed, and in 7 of the 12 families, at least one child over the age of 10 was also interviewed. In three cases where a child was not interviewed it was due to the fact that a parent felt that it would be too provocative or upsetting to discuss the issues. The purpose of these interviews was to learn and provide current, relevant, and sensitive information about the experiences and challenges of families adopting transracially from the public child welfare system, and to offer information that can improve the quality of services and supports provided to these unique families. To offer a contrast, and to enhance our understanding of the

issues, we interviewed transracial families who adopted from the public child welfare system as well as families who adopted through private agencies or independently.

Choosing to engage a small number of parents and children in in-depth, meaningful conversation and discussion about intimate topics meant that we learned a lot about the experiences of these specific families and their feelings about many issues. While each of the families is very different from the others, much of the time we heard stories that were similar to or applicable to other families. We have tried to highlight information that seems universal as well as what is unique because that is what most likely reflects the true reality of the transracial adoptive family--shared as well as exceptional experiences.

The Interview Guide

The semi-structured, open-ended interview guide covered the following topics and areas:

- **Adoption history/family background:** including parents' and children's backgrounds, relinquishment history, and reasons for adopting including transracial choice;
- **Openness and contact:** including the overall arrangement for contact, or not, how it was arranged, how it is working, how it has evolved, the role of the relationship, challenges and strengths, and issues around race;
- **Adoptive family issues and development:** including issues and challenges experienced around adoption, issues and challenges experienced around race, and children's understanding of adoption;
- **Services and supports:** including preparation for adoption, feelings of preparedness or not, services and supports received, how the use has evolved; and
- **Closing:** including advice to offer others, and recommendations for birth families.

Each of the 24 interviews lasted from 1-4 hours and resulted in single-spaced verbatim transcripts from 20-60 pages in length, for a total of approximately 700 pages of narrative. For the purposes of this chapter, the following themes will be discussed in depth: background for adoption, children's understanding of their adoption, openness and contact, race and the transracial adoptive family, community and family responses to adoption, and services and supports.

The Participants

A brief description of each of the families who participated in the study is provided below in order to offer a context for the discussion of findings themes that follow. The names and direct identifying information have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the participants, while the stories, experiences, and words spoken are unaltered. Of the 12 families, all are transracial. Five adopted from a public agency, five from a private agency, and two independently. Six of the families are headed by a single woman, either single by choice, because of divorce, or in one case the death of a spouse. All but one of the parents is Caucasian. One of the families is a lesbian family and the others are straight. Most of the families have children that are preteen or teenage because of our desire to speak with adoptees who were old enough to reflect on their experiences. The sample, therefore, is made up of families who adopted a number of years ago, rather than more recently. Of the 18 children, 6 are African American, 1 is Latino, 3 are Caucasian, and 8 are mixed-race, most commonly African American/Caucasian or Latino/Caucasian. Eight of the 12 families maintain some kind of current contact with an adopted child's birth family, whether birth mother, siblings, or

grandparents. This was not meant to be representative of all transracial adoptive families but instead to offer insight into issues around relationships with birth families.

- **Jean**, single, Caucasian and her son **Bobby**, 14, African American. They live in Southern California. Public agency adoption. Bobby was placed with Jean at the age of 5. They maintain occasional contact with Bobby's birth aunt and sibling.
- **Beth**, single, Caucasian and her children **Jamal**, 20 and **Ananda**, 17. Jamal and Ananda are African American and biological siblings. They live in Northern California. Public agency adoption - ages 7 and 4 at the time of placement. They maintain regular contact with other birth siblings.
- **Alicia**, divorced, Caucasian and her daughter **Maria**, 12, Latino. They live in Northern California. Public agency adoption. Maria was placed with Alicia at the age of 6. They maintain occasional contact with Maria's birth mother and siblings.
- **Abby and Kelly**, lesbian couple, both Caucasian and their daughter **Tyra**, 11, African American. Public agency adoption. Tyra was placed with them at the age of 5. Very limited contact with birth mother since adoption finalization.
- **Phyllis**, single, mixed-race and her daughter **Lee**, 19, African American/mixed. Public agency adoption. Lee was placed with Phyllis at 5 months of age. Occasional contact with birth siblings.
- **Andy and Jane**, married couple, Jewish Caucasian and their children **Nick**, 14, Caucasian, **Joshua**, 10, Latino/Caucasian and **Michelle**, 8, African American/Caucasian. All adoptions were through a private agency. All three children were placed at birth. History of contact with all three birth mothers and some of the birth siblings and grandparents.
- **John and Linda**, married couple, Caucasian and their children **Ruby**, 13, African American/mixed-race and **Deena**, 12, African American/mixed-race. Both adoptions were through a private agency. Both children were placed at birth. No contact with birth family.
- **Barbara**, divorced, Caucasian and her son **Dante**, 10, African American. Private agency adoption. Dante was placed with Barbara and her ex-husband at birth. History of contact with birth family in the past but not currently.
- **Cari and Justin**, married couple, Caucasian, Cari Jewish, and their children **Emma**, 8, Caucasian/Asian and **Max**, 6, Caucasian. Both children were adopted through a private agency. Both children were placed at birth. Frequent contact with birth families.

- **Libby and Michael**, married couple, Caucasian and their children **Erin**, 15, Caucasian and **Heidi**, 11, Latino/Caucasian. Both children were adopted through a private agency. Both children were placed at birth. Frequent contact with birth families.
- **Sarah and David**, married couple, Caucasian and **Tyler**, 10, African American. Adoption was independent. Tyler was placed at birth. History of frequent contact but none recently.
- **Trina**, widowed, Caucasian, and her children **Paul**, 18, African American/mixed-race and **Hannah**, 15, African American/mixed-race. Both adoptions were independent. Paul was placed at 14 months of age and Hannah was placed at birth. Occasional contact with birth families.

BACKGROUND FOR ADOPTION

The parents in this sample pursued adoption for a variety of reasons, and during the process had different feelings about what child characteristics, such as age, race, or developmental status, mattered most to them.

Reasons for Adoption

Parents had many reasons for seeking out adoption and in this sample it differed to some extent by whether they sought a public agency adoption, or another kind. In the private agency and independent adoptions, the adoptions were completed by couples that were married at the time of placement. For most of them adoption was a choice that was pursued only after a lengthy process of attempting to become pregnant and carry a biological child, and a subsequent determination of infertility. For some the decision was made to adopt rather than endure expensive and difficult fertility treatments. As Libby, a White married woman who adopted two children, describes it, “We had two IVF (in vitro fertilization) cycles and said who needs this?”

Another adoptive mother, Trina, who is now widowed, describes how she and her husband made the decision to adopt following a long illness.

We were trying to have our own kids and I had been very sick back in 1973 and basically all the surgery and scarring and stuff like that kept me from getting pregnant again. I actually was pregnant at the time I got really sick and then had a miscarriage at 5 months and--I had Crohn's disease and luckily I live almost symptom free... At that time I became very ill, but probably actually probably the stress of the pregnancy system. My uncle was a doctor and told me years later, 'If you had been my patient, I would have insisted you had an abortion.'

Initially, Trina and her husband became foster parents, but found the work difficult and unrewarding. She explains,

And then basically it came down to feeling like we didn't want to have – Not only didn't I want to lose kids that we were raising but also just the foster parenting thing and still continuing to deal on a monthly basis with birth parents was just, is crazy. It was crazy and just too stressful, stressful on the relationship. You could never get a decent relationship going with the kids.

For them, then, adoption was the ideal compromise.

For some couples that chose adoption because of their inability to have a biological child, aspects of infertility remain difficult years later. Jane comments, "It wasn't just a couple glasses of wine and I had a baby, you know what I mean, like most of my friends [chuckle] who can put the — they can put the little 'This is when I got pregnant, I remember the night.' And I'm going 'Oh, that's great.'" In comparison to these friends, Jane notes, "For years and years and years and years and years and lots of pain and lots of medicine and lots of surgery and all this kind of garbage. And it's like you just don't take it lightly after that. [Chuckle] That's all." Similarly, Libby explains,

I went to a baby shower a number of years ago by now, and I could do the child talk 'cause I have two kids but I couldn't do the birthing talk. And I just decided I didn't need to go to baby showers, you know. I would just send a gift and that would be fine. So on one level I really didn't care about the infertility, but every now and then there are those little moments where I think that's obviously an infertility issue, why I don't want to go to baby showers.

Overall, the parents who pursued private agency or independent adoptions tended to have a different perspective than those who followed the public agency adoption path. These parents were all single at the time of adoption placement, and the decision to adopt was a conscious choice to create a family or to adopt a particular child they already had a relationship with. For more than one parent, the realization that adopting an older child rather than an infant would be a better fit for her lifestyle influenced the decision to adopt a child in foster care. For example, Beth describes her decision to adopt two children:

I wanted a family. I wanted a family and my family—my birth family are—well, my mother—actually, my mother by that time had died, which was too bad because she really would have loved these children. She would have been a wonderful grandmother. And my father I had no relationship with and he died a few years, actually, after I adopted them. And I had two brothers but I have no adult relationship with them and they have not been--friendly. But my family was so dysfunctional when I was growing up that as adults we've not been close. So I really didn't have an immediate family and I wanted immediate—I wanted a family. And—also—but I don't know if it was like directly, did I really sit down and make this conscious decision but I think part of me did subconsciously. There's a lot of mental illness in my family and I didn't want to bring it back [by having biological children]. And I don't know maybe because it's easier to say that now or—but I have to say I'm glad that I haven't had biological children because it's just—reflecting back it's like no.

Beth chose to adopt from the public child welfare system because she recalls being aware of the pool of children in need of homes. She remembers thinking,

Well, I saw people adopting children from overseas and—that's an interesting question. How could you—I don't know. I just thought 'Well, there's a lot of children over here in our own country.' I mean there's a lot of children in need right here. Why do I need to adopt halfway around the world when—I mean—...Going to China and paying thousands of dollars to bring these children home and they were—I was seeing books and books and books of children who lived down the street who were being

bypassed because of their color or whatever. And it was like that's not right.

She describes the long process of getting her children after receiving her foster license. She remembers first that a social worker found a little girl that she believed would be a good match and set up a meeting. In recalling the possible match, Beth explains,

She would have looked like my daughter because she was half-Hispanic and half-White. She was coming out of a broken adoption. And I was just like not sure. I was just—I think I was just—well, they said I wasn't ready. So Judy, who was this social worker—we met—I met the little girl but we met—since I was already like—like hesitant. It was like "God, I don't know what in the world." She said, "Well, let's just meet at the zoo or something." Where did we meet? I can't—we did meet at the zoo. And so I was—she didn't know really who I was. And so we met and I liked her. She was a cute little girl, seemed really sweet. She was about 5 or 6 years old and—and so then Judy called me later and she said, "So what do you think?" And I said, "Well, I think that's a good idea." I think that's what I said. "I think that's a good idea." And she said, "What do you mean you 'think' that's a good idea? You 'think'." And I said, "Well, I don't know, let me think about it?" And she said, "No, you don't get to think about it. You either know or you don't know." And I was kind of taken aback by that. And she said, "Well, I'll give you 24 hours." ...And I said, "Okay." So then I called her the next day and I said, "You know, Judy, I—I think I really want to do this. I think I do." And she said, "No, Beth, we're not going to let you do this because this child has come out of a broken adoption. We're not going to put her in the home of someone who thinks they might want to do this." And she said, "You will know. When you are ready you will know." And she was right. So she says, "We're going to put you on hold for 6 months." So I was put on hold and I can't remember whether they contacted me or—or maybe she said, "When you think you're ready or whatever, you call us." Or maybe—I can't remember exactly how that next step happened. But, you know, I went off to Europe and I came back and I think I called Social Services. And I didn't sit down with myself and say, "Okay, I feel ready now." I just called them and I said, "I'm ready." And I kind of even surprised myself. It was like—and by that time though the population—even within 6 months who was—the children who were available had really changed.

After this realization, Beth attended an adoption picnic in a neighboring county and met the two children, then ages four and seven, that would become hers.

Two of the parents were working in a social services agency and developed a relationship with the child they ended up adopting. In both cases the child had many special needs, a history of multiple previous foster placements, and was unlikely to be adopted. For Abby, the decision to adopt Tyra, who was 5 years old and had already experienced seven different caregivers, was more about wanting to have her as a child and less about generically wanting a child. Referencing the high demands her child takes, she explains,

I still wanted to have a baby for a little while but pretty soon after, I got [over it and] that desire faded. And I don't really have it. I mean, I had wanted to have a baby ever since I was [young] but I don't anymore. I've thought--it's crossed my mind but--actually, when things started to work with her I felt such a sense of like competency as a parent I was like--you actually start seeing the forward progress and it's like this can work and so I should do it again. [Laughter]. First, I slapped myself. Then, her worker slapped me. And she really--I mean, even with the two of us now, it's a very, very different scenario than it was my first 3 years with her.

Child Characteristics

Once couples or individuals made the decision to adopt, they identified different characteristics that were important to them, such as the age of the child, gender, race, and the child's background. The issue of race is explored more thoroughly in a following section (see *Race and the Transracial Adoptive Family*). In some cases, what initially seemed important changed over time as the reality of the availability of children in need of permanency became clear. Barbara, who is now divorced, recalls her and her husband's initial desire for a healthy White infant. She recalls,

When we started looking into adoption we said—when somebody would ask, we'd say, "We want a healthy, newborn, White infant. And then when we got more educated about it and found out that there were couples lined up waiting around the block for each healthy, newborn White infant that was born and that so many African American babies, especially the boys, were going into foster care and getting stuck there—never getting out—we just said we really need a baby and we want a baby who needs us. And so it was really interesting how it happened because the day we made that decision, or the day after, I was talking on the phone with a friend of ours, who's a social worker, who's also an adoptive mom. She adopted after we did and we had met her through—an infertility group or whatever. And I said, "Oh, Anita, we've made a decision to adopt a child of color—a newborn baby of color." And she said, "Oh, well, that's interesting. I was just contacted yesterday by this [agency] and they're really good. Let me give you their name and number." And that's how that happened.

After a long process of introspection about adoption and what was important to her, Beth remembers seeing 4-year-old Ananda at an adoption picnic and knowing immediately that she wanted to adopt her.

Yeah, I saw Ananda. I wanted a little girl. It's too bad that I didn't—I—well, I was too old to have an infant. I didn't want an infant. I wanted a preschooler and there she was. I didn't care what color she was. That didn't matter to me. I knew what—I knew I was not—I probably wouldn't have the patience for a mentally handicapped child or physically handicapped. I knew I couldn't do that. But race was—for me race was not a factor and there she was.

Similarly, Alicia, who was divorced and single at the time of adoption placement, was clear that she wanted to adopt an older child, and felt that she would be best able to parent a girl since there wouldn't be a man in the household. During the first meeting with her daughter, who was living in a shelter at the time, she knew that she wanted to parent her.

Trina and her husband adopted their first child, Paul, through an adoption attorney when he was 14 months of age. When they became interested in adopting a second child, Trina recalls voicing concern about the birth mother's possible use of illicit

drugs during pregnancy. However, she did not consider issues of alcohol exposure, of which in fact her daughter shows signs. She recalls,

I was very specific, actually, with Hannah's birth mom when we talked on the phone and she assured me there were no drugs involved. She never said anything about alcohol and I don't know what I would have done had she told me. Maybe had she told me right in our first conversation, maybe I would have said well, we're not going to do this because for one thing, I had had all this illness stuff and I didn't—Felt like I didn't want to take on a child that was ill and then in addition to that, the length of time and hassle we had over Paul's adoption because of the birth father and stuff, I just didn't want to have—I kind of wanted somebody that was going to be hassle-free. If we're going to do this, I just don't have to hassle. So that was a concern, but that was about all.

Regardless of the reasons, in all situations, adoptive parents spent a great deal of time considering their priorities and evaluating what they felt capable of taking on. In general, those who adopted through private agencies were more interested in parenting a newborn child with few or no developmental difficulties, while those adopting children from foster care were more open to simply finding a child, or children, that seemed like a good fit for them and their lifestyle.

CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR ADOPTION

The children in this sample vary in age from 6 to 20, and therefore, because of developmental level alone, have very different views on what adoption means for them and their family. Additionally, it is clear that children adopted at birth have a different perspective than those who remember living with their birth mother or foster parents prior to adoption, and that voluntary relinquishment allows for a different understanding than involuntary removal. The children we talked with had varying thoughts about their adoption status.

Bobby, a 14-year-old boy who was placed for adoption at the age of 5 explains that “It means family coming together, having parents who love and care and emotional stuff.” In contrast, Joshua, age 10, was adopted at birth after his young birth mother decided to place him for adoption. He describes what he currently perceives as the lack of significance of being adopted:

It's just like — um — it's not like the biggest deal in the world 'cause lots of people are adopted and —Yeah. It doesn't mean they're different at all...it's a different kind of family but it doesn't mean they're like a different kind of person... Well, it's like not a big deal. Just you're getting a different mom than the person who gave birth to you. It's like not a big deal.

For Heidi, an 11-year-old girl of part White and part Mexican descent, who was voluntarily placed for adoption at birth, it is difficult to conceive of adoption any other way than what she experienced. She explains that she would define adoption as:

Well, you — they — some adoptions are like different, like how I was adopted was because my birth parents were too young to take care of me. But some adoptions are like they had a kid when they didn't know so like they like give it up sometimes or they're too young, like I said, or they have maybe -- I guess some people have, they just didn't like want to — well, they wanted a kid but they sort of had to give it up for some reason. And they don't let — like they have closed adoptions so they don't get to visit them and it's just like they're a different family and they're moving on. So there's a lot of different like kinds of ways you can be adopted... My birth parents are too young, they were too young. My birth mom was only 14 so yeah. And then she had kids I think at, at I think like 19 and — no — yeah, 19 and 21, 22.

Paul, who is now 18 years old, also identifies the wisdom of his adoption by examining the social situation of his birth parents. Here, he reflects on his own adoption story.

Um, I remember being told that I was adopted because my mother was too young to take care of me at the time which I think it was a smart decision that she made. I think she was around 14 or 15, maybe 16. So before I was told that she made that decision to put me up for adoption

because she couldn't, I guess, either financially support or she wasn't mentally ready to have a kid, which I believe is a very smart idea. That's all I was told. I'm not... I'm still not completely sure about the relationship between her and my mom, how I was adopted to her. 'Cause I heard there was some — that she had already known — my mom had already known my mom before. I'm not exactly sure.

For the most part, Paul doesn't recall spending a great deal of time considering his adoption, in large part because he was adopted when he was 14 months old. However, he has a level of maturity in his understanding of adoption not held by the younger children.

You know, I kind of like the fact that I didn't remember anything before. It's just kind of like — the first thing I remember was my mother now and, you know, it kind of makes it — I mean maybe that's the difference between me and someone else who's adopted who remembers stuff from before when they came — their family. So, you know, for all I know, this is my mom... I have no other mother, basically, is how I came into it. But for someone else, you know, it's very different — very different... You know, so my adoption — you know, I don't really — like I said, I don't really think too much about it. It's not something that's all in my face every single day... I don't know, maybe — like during high school I felt weird — the fact that I went to a — basically an all-Black school and whenever I brought a friend over here. I was just wondering what they were thinking about when they came home and they see my mom and then they see me and, you know, I was just wondering about that.

In contrast to Paul's experiences, Bobby indirectly reflects on the experience of living with multiple foster families prior to a permanent placement. He explains,

It's fun being adopted. Because you get the — It's like a video game. Yeah, see, once you're done with — All right, once you're tired of your family like Nintendo, you switch over or if they don't like you, they trade you back like a game to a different family. [Laughter] And it's bouncing around, it's almost like hey, you want this, you want this? Double O7, it's like want this kid? It's like sure. So I switch over to another family. So it's just like bouncing around. It's like a game.

For some children it is difficult to imagine what life would be like without adoption or their adoptive family. Discussions focus on concrete issues rather than the possible reality of growing up with the parents who gave birth to them and living in the situation they were born into. For Heidi, placed with her parents at birth, thinking about not being adopted means having been born to her adoptive parents rather than her birth parents.

Well, I wouldn't be Mexican and probably look different because my parents don't really look like me. And if I wasn't adopted, like they had me, my parents? Oh, then I probably – yeah, I'd probably have like a different life... Well, none of my friends would like know anything, like I'm adopted or Mexican or anything like that. And I'd look different and I'd probably like not have like as much conversations at like the dinner table around being adopted, stuff like that.

Although Heidi has not found any disadvantage to being adopted, she did comment that at times, she tires of discussing it.

Well, sometimes my mom brings it up and we talk about it and then I tell her – and then I bring up a different subject and start talking about that... Yeah, I'd probably say that, or my dad, my parents [bring it up most of this time]... I don't know. They just like feel like talking about it a lot. I don't know why. [Do you get tired of talking about it?] Yeah, 'cause we talk – I don't know, it just kind of -- There's not like tons and tons and tons to say so after we talk about it for like 10 minutes then I sort of get bored with it... Well, they want to usually talk about how I like it and all that stuff, so I just kind of get bored with it... Yeah, there's like other topics and kid stuff that – 'cause that's something in my life that I can, like I'm passing on right now, which they just bring it up.

For Tyra, an 11-year-old girl who experienced multiple foster placements, the meaning of adoption includes a narrative from the time she was removed from her birth mother and placed in a variety of homes until she was placed with her adoptive mother at age 5.

Okay. I — was taken away from my family then I went to live with my, um — this lady and I have no idea what her name was and who she was... I was little. And then I lived with my grandma — my dad's mom and her

husband and I lived with them for probably a couple of months; and then I moved with this lady named Elaine and I lived with her for a few years. While I was living with her I had a social worker and... Wait – no, before Abby was my social worker I had a social worker that was after. Then Abby brought over this lady named Karen and I — after — she met them there — I — someone decided that I was going to go live with her so I went over to her house and moved in with her. I lived with her for [a little while] and then Abby decided she was going to adopt me so I went to go to stay with these people named Jones — well, the little girl's name was Rebecca and her mom was named Ms. Jones, at least that's what I called her... No, she was older. And so then I went to go live with my mom, we moved into an apartment — no, we moved into an apartment somewhere around here. And then after a while we moved into an apartment on Adeline Street and I think it was maybe a year later she adopted me and I was like, I think, 6 years old. And then — my mom met Kelly.

Bobby, age 14, feels that part of the difficulty in conceptualizing adoption is the uniqueness of each case. He explains, “Every adoption group of people are different. We’re all different even if we’re adopted, even if we’re not adopted. We’re all unique so that came from the heart. That was good. I should have wrote that down.”

OPENNESS AND CONTACT

The families in this study maintain different levels of openness and contact with their child’s birth family, from no contact at all to the extraordinary level of weekly contact, and with varying members of their children’s natal families, from birth mothers to cousins. However, in seeking participants for this study we solicited families who either had current contact or had contact at some point in the past. It is therefore a particular sample in that respect. Openness and contact are not static arrangements, but rather, are part of a dynamic and evolving relationship that includes negotiations around familial boundaries, waxing and waning levels of access or interest on different members’ parts, developmental changes, and shifting hopes and feelings. Additionally, the circumstances of the initial adoption placement influence expectations for contact as

well as the kinds of situations most likely to occur. Adoptive families' desire to maintain contact—or attempts to maintain contact—brought many issues to the forefront of family life. But overall, we did not hear truly consistent differences between the experiences of those who adopted from the public child welfare system and those who adopted through a private agency or independently. In this section, adoptive parents and children describe the reasons they choose to have on-going openness and contact, their efforts to maintain contact, the challenges in doing so, and the ways that openness and contact remain important in their lives.

Choosing Openness and Contact

Families prioritized contact for a variety of reasons. For some, contact provides the ability to discuss race and culture. For others, it serves to provide children with information about their heritage or medical history. Some believe that contact can demystify natal families for children who might otherwise have developed unrealistic images of their absent relatives, or at the very least provide a more grounded understanding of the circumstances surrounding their adoption.

Several families reported that contact provides a way to discuss and engage with racial difference in the adoptive family unit. In discussing whether she would be as invested in maintaining contact had her son not been of a different race, Sarah reflects:

Well, I wonder if I would care so much about contact if we had – if our child that we adopted was White, because I know what it's like to be White but I don't know what it's like to be Black and I need them in his life to help me with that. And then I get into that whole – and I did this whole thing at the church too. Are we – are we here because we're using these people in another way, because we only want them in our lives for our son? You know, we wouldn't be at the Baptist Church if it weren't for Tyler so is that just using people in a different way than has been used in the past or is it

a legitimate reason to want to reach out and make support nets for your son, your child? It's like this web of what's right and what's wrong.

Here, Sarah questions both her own motivation as well as whether her desire to participate in those communities lacks a sincerity since she would not seek out multiracial community resources had she not adopted a child of color. However, in choosing access to both birth family members of color and a predominantly Black church, the utility of openness as a way of engaging with racial difference is clear.

For other parents, contact gave adoptive parents information about family medical history on behalf of their children. Cari remembers:

I'm fond of both of them, so much that it is nice that way. And then the obvious things about being able to get information, and when Emma had this ADD I could call and say, 'Does anybody have that? Does anybody have any other psychiatric problems?' And so that's helpful.

Similarly, some adoptive families explained that contact created the possibility of giving their children more information with which to understand themselves. Jean, who lacks consistent contact with her son's extended birth family, explains why she wishes they had more.

Well, and ideally there would be contact now even through letters or something. There would be a picture. I'd see a picture of her – he'd have a picture of her extended family, he could see his birth grandparents' pictures and all the kids in that family and see how he looks like them and — but...It's usually me who – I'm the one who does things like when we're going by a construction site now, I remind him "Your birth grandfather was a construction worker and you" — I've done this since he was really small — "Maybe you might like to do 'cause you like to move things and carry things and build things." So — yeah.

Similarly, Cari explained why she persists in maintaining contact with her child's birth parent:

I think you can't underestimate how strong that curiosity is and that - and I know all kids are wired differently. Some kids are really curious and some hardly at all but I think — to me I just felt like having the opportunity is what's important, that they at least have the opportunity... Yeah, and just — when you don't have anyone who looks like you, it's like "Where did I get these big hands," or — it's just — I heard somebody describe it, it's like you came into the movie in the middle and it's this really great movie but you didn't — and you're happy and everything but you just want to know the beginning of the movie.

Other parents felt that by having access to their birth families, children would grow up with more realistic views of their families, including an awareness of their shortcomings. Linda bemoaned her lack of contact with her children's birth mothers, explaining, "I personally think that it would – well, maybe demystify, seems – I mean, I think it would be good for the kids too." She goes on to explain how contact might make the image of their birth mothers less powerful. In thinking through potential contact, Linda explains how contact might remove her daughter's sense of anger at having lost contact with her birth mother:

I think that has its pluses and its minuses. I mean, everything they know now comes from me, although they have files and they've both looked in their files, which is good because then it's like not just what I'm telling them. But – and I think there was a period of time there too when Ruby, she had her birth mother's picture out there and then I think she got angry. She didn't want it on her chest anymore, chest of drawers... And then I said okay, well – but I said I was going to put it back in the file. I didn't want it to get lost. I think at that time she was feeling angry... Yeah. And I'm not -- I just you know, try to be as -- how will I say it? -- reassuring as possible that, you know, how she feels now is one thing but in the long run I have pledged that she will be reunited with her.

Sarah describes how she and her husband came to prioritize contact, both in terms of their own comfort with it and what they thought it would offer their son. She explains,

open adoption is not co-parenting and that got real clear for us in that we could -- you know, it doesn't necessarily mean somebody's going to show up on your doorstep at Christmas and think they're going to spend

Christmas with you and the baby. You could have some boundaries around all that. And really hearing all the horror stories about kids, young and old, who didn't know anything about their birth families and the – you know, the – well, if they didn't know they were adopted, looking back on it, this kind of disconnect that they always felt and not knowing what that was about, or knowing they were adopted but not having any information and having to fantasize if, you know, every Black woman they see on the street might be their birth mother, in Tyler's case. And it just seems like it's all about what's best for the child and I think that's – that was the thing that connected Lourdes and I and David. She just really wanted – she wanted her child to be raised the best that it could and she didn't feel like at that point in her life she could offer that.

For other parents, contact allowed their children to understand more about their own histories, including the circumstances surrounding their adoptions. For example, Jean who encourages her son to maintain contact with his birth family, describes her attitude about contact with them:

We have open communication so I don't remember if he actually asked me why this, but I explained the big picture to him. You have several brothers and sisters, one of them here, one is – Your mom had... I try to put it in the bigger picture about all the people... and I try to be as honest as possible about things, too. So he doesn't grow up and all of a sudden his bubble gets popped. And I try to encourage him to call the biological father who claimed to a biological father, but he was really opposed to it, so I don't know if he actually did make those, I know he tried once, but I don't know if he [made] other attempts.

Jean actively encourages her son to contact his biological family members so he can have all the information he needs for his own sense of self. Even parents who do not encourage or maintain active or consistent contact noted the benefit of occasional contact to their children. For example, Abby has not been able to maintain contact with her daughter Tyra's birth mother, Diane, who has moved around a great deal since her parental rights were involuntarily terminated. Nonetheless, she recalls how a chance

encounter provided her daughter with important information. She describes the interaction at a department store:

We were in a store and she came up to us... She recognized us. And -- I mean, she recognized Tyra... I had been walking around with this sense of -- not dread, but just like waiting. When are we going to run into her birth mother? I had heard -- I knew she was back in the area and so it just felt like this was going to happen and it actually -- I think was -- I mean, Tyra was the same way. She was waiting to run into her too because I had to warn her. "Look. She's back in the area and we may see her someday." And so it actually took that away. We didn't have to wonder about that anymore. And I think it actually was a pretty positive experience overall, in spite of being difficult. She actually was really respectful of my role and -- you know, she came up and said, 'I know this is probably not the best idea,' or, 'This is probably not something I should do,' something like that. 'But I'm Diane, and...' Oh yeah, the first thing [Tyra] did was turn and hide her face... It was 3 years ago... like 2 weeks before the adoption was finalized. So it was really wonderful timing actually... Diane and I were talking a little bit and then she gradually turned around and then she went and hugged Diane and then they both cried and... luckily we were upstairs where there weren't as many people. She said, 'I'm --' She referred to me as your mom -- when she talked to my -- and she said, "You know, I've never -- I don't ever want you to think that I don't love you," which was really wonderful for Tyra to hear.

Missing Contact

Some parents wanted to maintain contact with their children's birth families but were unable to do so in the way they wanted. Trina explains her attempts to stay in touch with her son's maternal grandmother who had been a part-time caregiver to her multiracial son before he was adopted at 18 months through a private attorney.

I spoke also with his birth grandmother and she said to me, she said well, I miss him terribly, I'm going to miss him, but I'm still his grandmother. And I said absolutely, you absolutely are and we want to stay in touch. So they came to visit a couple times and I think what happened -- She was very, she is warm when I call, but I'm the one that makes the contacts... I mean, I'm the one that will call up and say hey, we haven't talked in a long time, I want to make sure I have your right address and send you pictures, which we did recently and then she'll write a note right back once she gets the stuff. But she never initiates it and we went for a fairly long time without

being in touch, and I think it really – She got so disgusted with Paul’s birth mother and her – Every time I call her, she sort of has nothing good to say about her. “Oh, she was out of jail for a while, she didn’t even stop by and say hello and she knows I don’t want to have anything to do with her.” She’s doing this stuff and so I think it just was sort of easier not to have the relationship with Paul if she was feeling that way.

Trina, whose younger child Hannah was adopted at birth, had some on-going contact with her birth mother until she died when Hannah was nine. As Hannah’s curiosity about her history grew, Trina tried to establish some level of contact with Hannah’s African American biological father.

I wrote a letter to him and he returned the call almost immediately after he got the letter... and he sounded very happy to hear from us except that... his wife had opened his mail... And [she] didn’t know [he had a daughter with another woman] and the letter I wrote was very low key. It was, “I think that you might be, have been her birth father.” I don’t think he knew that the birth mother was dead and... So anyway he and I had this conversation. Hannah said “Oh, I’m going to talk to him” and she was real excited that we got in touch with him and he – I said to him also, “please send a picture. We don’t have any idea what you look like.” So he sort of indicated that this thing with his wife, his wife had read the letter, and she didn’t know about it. He was going to kind of have to get that straight, blah, blah, and he didn’t want her given up for adoption. And so I said, “Well, you have her address, you have this, I’d really appreciate if you’d send this stuff.” So then we didn’t hear anything, didn’t hear anything, and then I don’t know, a couple, a few months later, a couple months later I tried to call and that phone was disconnected and it’s my belief that that’s why. And I thought about sending another letter registered just to him so that he’d have to sign for it, but it’s not – When Hannah’s 18, if she wants the address [she can pursue it] and I told her that actually really recently. I said, ‘cause she’s disappointed. She said, “I really want to see what my half brothers look like and I really want to see...” So that’s disappointing and I just try to explain to her that these things happen and people – He loved her birth mother but he also was married and that his wife is upset. That’s a reality.

Although Trina is disappointed for her children, who she believes would both benefit from contact, she also recognizes that as adults, they can make choices to pursue contact themselves. Similarly, Barbara voiced sadness that she has not been

able to establish contact with her son's birth family, which she believes would provide him with something she cannot.

I don't know. It feels like I'm missing — I'm missing a link — the fact that there's no contact. 'Cause it would be — I'm the kind of person who would easily — even though she's in Minneapolis — we would be going there a couple times a year. I mean we would be seeing them, it would be like a huge extended family. And we travel to Wisconsin usually at least once a year and we would stop in Minneapolis. I mean I've had that fantasy bazillions of times. So — so, yeah, it's a missing piece and I would like that for him at some point and I don't know if he'll ever get it. Like to be realistic, I don't know even when he's an adult whether she will — whether that will still be so painful that she's just said, "That's a closed chapter, that's the end and--"

Many adopted children who lack actual contact are preoccupied with imagining what contact would entail. For example, Bobby has never met his biological father, but nonetheless spends time imagining what contact would involve. In the following passage, Bobby describes his efforts to mentally rehearse for the day his father calls and planning how he will handle the situation:

Well, 'cause later — I want to see how it is just like a theory. Like if he really claims to be my biological father, then and I'm older and if he calls, when I pick up the phone he's going to ask for me and he's going to ask for Bobby and [I'm] going to go, "Yeah," and I'm going to ask him a series of questions to see how old he is, if he's really keeping track. If he's not and if he says like he's like 30 and I'll be 25, there you go. Scam right there.

Negotiating Contact

Although many parents desire contact, the ability to implement and maintain it on a regular basis holds many challenges. Openness and contact often are not automatic, but instead evolve over time. In some private adoptions, the process of negotiation begins before the birth. Several adoptive parents reported discussing possible future contact with a pregnant woman when deciding whether to pursue adopting her child. In

others, such conversations came later. Reflecting on this, Cari, for example, remembers how contact evolved with the biological families of each of her children. Here she describes leaving the hospital following the birth of her son, her second child:

And I remember when he — we actually left the hospital with him, her mother, and she were there and even though it's like we were going to see them later in the week, everybody was crying and the four of us were just sort of — just spontaneously hugging each other and they were saying, "Please, take good care of him." But then — but it wasn't like this horrible then we get on a plane or something. I mean we saw them 2 days later and they were coming to the hotel so it was nice 'cause they could keep seeing we're not going to like run away with him and stuff. And it was — just — with both situations it was just sort of — just intuitive. I mean — I would say in both situations we heard from them a lot more in the beginning where they'd be calling and chatting or whatever. And then it just sort of drifted off. And in both situations we planned a visit pretty soon after...And then it just sort of fell into this pattern of every year we'd see each other once and it would be — we'd take turns — that either they'd come here or we'd go there. And we just sort of fell into this pattern of like "Well, next year we'll see you," ...even though it wasn't like a stated thing up front.

For many families contact changed over time. As Michael explains of his daughters' adoptions:

A lot of it just happened...It just sort of — you know, when people ask me how we did it, my pat response is, 'Well, there's no manual or rulebook for this. You just sort of play it how it feels. If it feels right you pursue it, if it doesn't you don't.' And it's sort of evolved over time I think.

In thinking further about what has facilitated their close relationships with both of their daughters' birth families, Michael adds,

I think what it all hinges on is that initial trust and connection you have, especially with the birth mom, even more than the birth dad. But if there's the right connection and trust there, I think it will evolve. If there isn't, then there's going to be that lull between — and that's where a lot of the couples we know that have adopted, it seems like there's that wall there. Either they don't want to or they can't break through it.

Both of Libby and Michael's children were adopted as newborns in private adoptions. As such, the issues of "trust" are different than for those whose children were adopted through the public foster care system, where biological parents' rights are often involuntarily terminated and where they may be social factors that make contact more precarious. Michael acknowledges, "they weren't drug users or in jail. You know, there's lots of things that encumber other adoptions." Speaking to this issue, Paul, who was adopted at 18 months old from a home that is similar to those of many children in public adoptions, describes the challenges in maintaining contact with his birth mother:

For all I know I think she's in jail again right now. I think she's in prison. She has an al — a drug problem. I'm not sure which drug. She's back and forth to prison a lot from what I know. But I used to see her when she was out. Whenever she was out we'd take the chance and go down there.

Because of the varied situations that led to a child being freed or relinquished for adoption, many adoptive parents voiced that although they wanted contact, they also struggled to establish appropriate boundaries with their children's biological family members. For example, Beth described her struggles to erect boundaries to protect her children, adopted from foster care, from their birth mother, who has a long history of drug addiction, crime, and incarceration. In discussing whether contact is possible with parents who have been deemed by courts to be unsafe to raise their children, Beth explains that although she is concerned about that, she recognizes that contact is important for her children's well-being. She explains, "Well, I feel that – I feel like that's what's going to make my children whole. I mean I really believe that. Maybe it's naïve but — and I feel like they have a right. That's their right."

Cari also feels that boundaries between her family and her children's birth families are necessary. For them, the geographical distance has helped to maintain those boundaries. In reflecting on the role of distance, she notes,

...I could not do this if they lived in this state. I mean all — and I wouldn't have known that. I wouldn't have known that before, but if I was giving somebody advice [chuckle] is — because the psychological boundaries are pretty good but it really helps to have 2,000 miles between you, and just the boundaries of "we can't afford" or "we don't have time to be visiting each other all the time." And so when we have these visits I don't get anxious about them but it does take a lot out of us. We sort of rise to the occasion just — and mainly 'cause it — it's all these family dynamics. And so doing it once a year and knowing that they're far away and that [the birth mom] isn't — in Sacramento... There's months and months and months and months at a time that we don't hear from anybody and that's just fine.

Cari strives to maintain distance from her children's birth families, while also facilitating her children's access to knowledge about their natal families. She explains how this works for her:

I guess it's sort of compartmentalized. I mean the contact part is compartmentalized. The open adoption part is very much a part of our lives but it's controlled within our little family unit. Like Emma'll be eating a kiwi and say, "Oh, I love kiwis." And I'll say, "Oh, [your birth mom] loves kiwis, that's probably why you love kiwis." And so we're always talking about it, but it's our script in our household and it's not being invaded from outside... And that makes a big difference.

Many parents who are committed to contact are not able to establish the same level of contact with each of their children's mothers. Cari's second child, Max, has a high level of contact. In comparison, she has different concerns and issues regarding contact with her older child Emma's birth mother. She explains,

You know, the interesting thing is when I compare it to my daughter's — I mean my daughter has spent the night at her birth mom's house and, in fact -- well, when Max was born it's like "What are we doing to do with this 3½-year-old?" And so she spent the night at her birth mom's...And last

summer she did spend two nights at her birth mom's but her birth mom took off work and she was with her every second and so that was fine with me. But I actually — just because of the environment that her birth mom lives in — I wouldn't send her there for a week with her birth mom working and her being left with different people. I wouldn't feel safe about it and I wouldn't do it 'cause I would feel like there could be someone around that — I just — it wouldn't feel safe to me. But I know that Max is going to be every second in the bosom of this — upper middle-class family where they all adore him and he's not — just because of the other birth mom's circumstances, Emma could be left with a neighbor or with —

Within Cari's story is a reflection of how each birth parent has different life circumstances, mediated by class, which alters her willingness to leave them—and for how long—unsupervised with their birth parents. Even when safety is not the primary concern, efforts to maintain contact for the children's benefit can often place adoptive parents in uncomfortable situations. Jean describes how her son gains access to his natal family, even as it places her in unfamiliar situations:

I just called people and somebody's got to make the step. And it's not easy because as I said, I'm the only White in the family and I know they do not feel real comfortable... Yeah, but I'm lucky that he has this close relationship with our extended family because their children have — They've known Bobby and they've been connected for good...I mean, that's his other mother, too.

As important as contact is for her son, Jean notes that, “I don't always feel terribly comfortable in the group settings, but and they ask, want to know questions. They ask a lot of questions. That's okay, but I'm pretty easy about stuff. It doesn't bother me.”

Similarly, Cari describes how her family's efforts to maintain a relationship with her son's birth father held the potential for discomfort and required boundary negotiation. She describes her son's interest in knowing his father and the ensuing contact:

I think the child's curiosity — I mean what's amazing to me is how strong that bond is even if there's been negative contact and just the curiosity about it and your emotional security is with your adopted family, presumably. But you're still curious and want to see and want to — and if you're in a safe environment with your adoptive family. I mean with Max's birth father, who we did meet several times, he — actually, we met him — the first time he was in jail for drugs but we met him both 'cause we wanted to and he was willing to sign so we went there in the jail and he signed. But he wanted to have contact with Max for the first couple years and because he'd been a drug user we told him up front we don't feel safe with that. And I don't want — I told him "I don't want to be watching my purse every second." [Chuckle] And so he had to sort of prove to us that he — that we could trust him. And then, ironically, by the time that sort of got resolved — we had some communication and he visited — we visited with him once and then he — we sort of lost contact with him and he sort of drifted away, I think for his own issues.

Many families who cannot maintain contact with biological parents are able to establish relationships with other family members. For example, Tyra describes her contact with her biological half siblings—one of whom is 1 year younger than her—every few months, explaining, “We play and watch TV... Me and my sister [are good friends]...and me and my brother kind of. But he's 4 years younger than me so it's harder.” In describing her stepmother, who cared for her before she was freed for adoption, Tyra explains, “She likes to talk. She's nice. Um — see, she doesn't make us go to bed early and we just have to play quietly or watch TV in the middle of the night.” For her, these relationships are valuable.

Jean allows her son Bobby to visit with his birth relatives for extended stays, which gives him access to the larger family. Even as she describes the importance of contact, she notes the difficulties she has in maintaining it. For example, when he stayed with his aunt for 2 weeks,

she tried to connect some of the extended family so she set up like little play days and stuff like with some of his cousins and things... One of his

cousins, his first cousin, yeah, his first cousin called and wanted me to take in the child that she – Oh, her brother's kid, she was the foster parent for her brother's kid and she was sick. She wanted me to bring him, but that would be fine for a couple of months...so we have contact with people but they – It's not like it was before. When we... I can't remember now...Anyway, there was this whole kind of a large group of the family came over to our house and it was his four great aunts, his cousins, his [uncles] and their wives... And then we had our adoption party, they came again, and then after that and we saw Bill and Bessie, but the rest of them – We did go to one family thing at his Aunt Donette and that was it. We haven't – It kind of just waned off. They don't – As I say, Bessie's probably about the only one. The rest of them, I have to call them.

Vulnerability of Contact

In addition to offering a great deal, having contact creates new vulnerability for adoptive families. Sarah established contact with her African American son's birth mother, Lourdes, and maintained it for several years. When her son was about 10 years old, Lourdes moved out of the area and has not reestablished contact. In discussing what this has been like, Sarah explains that it has been "Intense. Yeah, and I'm really, really pissed off with her, if the truth be told, for doing that to my boy." Even with the loss of contact hurting her son, Sarah still thinks about how much they would have lost had they never established contact:

Oh, I think we would feel so – There would be such a piece that isn't there. I mean, he's got – Ask him to show you the eyebrow when you're talking with him. He's got this thing he does with his eyebrow and it's Lourdes. I mean, she does that with her eyebrow. And he really likes to tinker and take things apart and she has told us that Alexander loved to take things apart but he never put them back together. I mean, it's like these pieces of who he is. So I feel – well, I would be so left to wonder. It's really hard to imagine that. I think we'd all feel cheated and sad and like Tyler's missing an important piece. And to be honest, I wonder if – if I would feel those things as strongly if he was like us. I mean, how can you not have – I mean, maybe the thing is that open adoption is not the same as obvious adoption. Maybe that's what the real difference is. But we're an obvious adoptive family so how do you, you know?

Even as she recognizes the importance of having contact, Beth describes her unwillingness to allow unmediated contact between her children and their birth mother, Shakira, who has been incarcerated for most of her life. In discussing her concerns with allowing her children to resume contact with their biological mother, from whom they were removed as toddlers after Shakira was found trying to sell Ananda for drugs, Beth is uncomfortable with Shakira's lack of insight about her history and its effect on her children. In the following passage, she describes an instance when her children's birth mother contacted her children and the impact it had on them.

And then the next day Shakira called and I remember the conversation was – I wasn't — it was more like “Oh, okay. Yeah. No, you can't speak to them.” And “Well, I want to,” and I said, “Well, you can't.” I mean it was — there was no emotion connected to it. I remember how surprised I was at that that I didn't say, ... “You, look what you did to these, blah-blah-blah.” I didn't — I wasn't like that at all. It was like business...I don't know, I just — it was no emotional conversation at all. I just said, “No, they're not home right now.” And “Can I speak with them?” And I said, “Well, you know, it's not appropriate for you to be in touch with us right now. If you want to write them or call them — I mean not call them — if you want to write them or send them presents you're welcome to do so and here's an address but please don't call us again.” It was just kind of like that.

Although Beth asked her to refrain from future calls, she remembers that her children's birth mother

called on Mother's Day 3 days later and we were at breakfast. And we came home — like we walk in the door and I push the button to hear the messages and there she is and we're all standing there listening to this,” I'm calling to talk — I'm their — I'm their real mom. I'm calling to say hello to Ananda and Jamal and to have them please call me and let me know and — ‘cause I feel lost without them,” and blah-blah-blah-blah-blah-blah.

Initially, her son wanted to return her call, which Beth, concerned about his emotional well-being, discouraged.

Jamal wanted to call her back and I said that I didn't feel it was appropriate. I said, "We don't know her. What we do know is that she did some really horrible things to you guys." And he was like — he was maybe 15 — well, let's see, he's 19 now. He was like 14 or 15. I said, "I have an obligation to protect you and that's my first obligation." I said, "If you want to write to her you can do that. I'll give you her address. But I don't want her calling our home." And Ananda wasn't interested. She understood what I was saying and she said, "Mom's right about this," or something. And I talked with the therapist later about it and — about Jamal's response 'cause he was kind of annoyed with me. And he's — and... Ananda's therapist who I continued to see. And she said it was probably Jamal trying to make his mother feel better. And I would say that was probably right now 'cause that's kind of like — that's kind of his personality — to make it right. And it wasn't so much that he wanted to, it was that he felt bad for her.

Beth's family struggles to balance the value in having access to Shakira and the information that would bring and the emotional liability of allowing a woman who seems to have little insight into the ways her actions led to the loss of her children.

A different sort of risk comes when parents feel that they cannot maintain equal amounts of access for each of their children. Michael describes the ways he and Libby have tried to provide equal amounts of openness and contact for each of their daughters:

I think the way I would interpret whether it's important for the kids that they're both adopted — and this is inserting my opinion on it, but I think, yes. Because they're still at the age where they're younger siblings, they fight, and one has a big club to hit the other with if one was biological, one wasn't, or even if one was open adoption, the other, "Well, your parents don't want to see — your birth parents don't want to see you." I think that could be a big club in a fight situation.

Libby adds that openness has given one of her adopted daughters a new vocabulary in arguments with them. Here she describes how her younger daughter Heidi occasionally threatens to go live with her birth parents:

Heidi's club, well, Heidi, who has much more temper, she's already very early, "You're not my real mom, I don't have to listen to you; I'm going to go live with Christie and Juan," who would be much stricter than we are. And that "Erin's your favorite daughter." She's never said, "Erin's your favorite daughter" in anything related to adoption or she's biological, I'm not, 'cause she doesn't have that. But "she's your favorite daughter" thing is occurring.

Similar to this, Jane found that establishing and maintaining contact with one of her children's mothers was challenging because of that woman's own social situation. They had no contact at all for the first 3 years. In understanding the influence her boyfriend had over her, Jane explained that when her son was placed with them at birth, she left a message for her son's birth mother, saying "'Please tell her that she can all us anytime, anytime.' 'Cause I knew that the fiancé was keeping a — keeping his thumb on that situation. I felt really bad about that and there's nothing I could do at all. And so for those 3 years he had not allowed any contact at all." In reflecting on the lack of contact leading up to a call from his birth mother, Jane explains,

She was being really pressured. So then we were in contact with her while she was in California and then she moved to Florida and we've had — and that's been about a couple of years we haven't heard anything from her. I have an address that I send pictures to and the holiday card thing too, but I haven't heard back.

Recognizing the limits of their own desire to maintain contact, Jane observes, "There's nothing — you can't force yourself on somebody... You can't insinuate yourself into someone's life if they don't want you there. And so I figured — I was hoping, I was hoping that some day she would dump this guy and come to her sense [chuckle] and that's what she did. [Chuckle]." Within this, we can see an example of how contact may wax and wane, but is always inextricably bound with the social situations of both families and their members.

Reactions to Contact

Reactions from family members and friends around the issue of maintaining contact with a child's birth family can in some cases create tensions while in others offer a further source of support. Libby noted that although her own family was supportive of her adoption of a White infant and then a half-Mexican, half-White infant 2 years later, she has chosen to prioritize visiting her second child's birth family over her own. She explains,

I think my mother probably feels a little bit – 'cause I don't make any effort to put my cousins and, you know, Christmas cards, and on her brother's side, they're not even good at sending us a Christmas card. We really have focused our family energy on the birth families and I think she thinks that I ought to go to Wisconsin every now and then and see her relatives.

Some families of origin disapproved of the adoptive parents' desire to maintain openness with their children's birth family. Jane describes her father's difficulty accepting this aspect of the adoption.

Um — my dad is from a different generation and he has a lot of trouble accepting our openness. And it's not like we have people traipsing through our home and staying — squatting on our front yard or anything like that but he has — my father has real — he has a real problem with that. (With just the concept?) Yes. The concept and the actual part that we have visited and they've visited us and that kind of thing. That's hard for him — So -- my dad... So my dad has had a hard time with it, a very hard time. And I think [my husband's] parents probably do too but his dad has now passed away. But they would never, ever say anything. Of course, my father would say something 'cause that's the way he is.

Many families of origin were supportive of adoptive parents' efforts to maintain openness with the adopted children's families. Cari discussed her own parents' understanding of their arrangements.

Yeah, I think the primary players are my parents who are quite elderly. They're — my dad just turned 80 and my mom's in her late '70s. And my

dad — it's been very much of an evolution of thinking that the open adoption was really asking for big trouble to being a total...total convert — to now he goes around proselytizing... Except he does have trouble with this visit that we're doing this week. That's going a little too far. But he's — and, in fact, the last visit we did — was it the last one or maybe the time before — there was one visit where we went to Virginia and they actually wanted to go with us because this place had taken on mythic proportions for them. This is this place where these wonderful grandchildren had come from so they wanted to go to the Land of Oz and meet all these people. So they're very open. And my mom is just a very intuitive person and she just kind of got the emotional dynamic so it made intuitive sense to her from the beginning and she just kind of explained it to my dad.

Although there is significant variety in the responses adoptive families describe of their own families, it is important to note the transformative nature many of these relationships have on extended families. For some adoptive grandparents, their adult children's choice to adopt a child of color or maintain openness challenges many of their traditional notions of family. In one poignant example, Abby described her own grandmother, who, living in South Carolina, grew up to believe in the superiority of Whites. Abby remembers a time when her grandmother sent Tyra a birthday card that had a picture of an African American girl on it with the title "Happy Birthday to my Great Granddaughter." In receiving the card, Abby visualized her racist grandmother picking the card out and handing it to the clerk at the local drugstore. "That's revolution," she thought.

Conclusion

Often, families establishing contact face inquiries from others in their social circle. For example, in discussing how strangers react to her and her husband's choice to adopt two children and to maintain close contact with their birth families, Libby is aware how unusual others think it is that she trusts the birth mothers with her daughters:

I think a combination of curiosity and wow, I couldn't do that. It's been a whole range. My perception is not a lot of negative reactions. There's always initially, if somebody's not familiar with, especially with open adoption, there's I think some worry or concern for us, like, "Well, oh they're going to Disneyland with the birth parents. Aren't you worried about that?" "No." And I think they see that we're so relaxed and easygoing about it that over time they just, they sort of shake their heads and think I don't think I could do that but it's working for them, you know, more power to them, is my perception...[Its] not that they're negative towards us, it's just that that concept scares the heck out of them, more so than people that have their own biological kids, who think gee, Michael and Libby, that's curious what you're doing. I don't think I could do it but that's pretty interesting.

Libby and Michael, who maintain a high level of openness with both of their daughters' biological parents, relayed a story in which they went to Mexico so that their daughter could be in her father's wedding processional. In doing so, he and Libby accepted that their daughter is still a part of his family, even if not in any legal sense. Libby and Michael maintain an exceptional level of openness compared to most adoptive families and work to nurture these relationships. For example, Libby reflects on the intertwined families that attended their oldest daughter's third birthday. In addition to her family, their daughter's birth father, his mother, her birth mother and her mother and grandmother, one of two of her siblings, a couple of friends, and school friends and their parents were all in attendance. Libby remembers thinking that they had reached "the pinnacle of bizarreness." Michael noted, "This is like a really bad Hollywood script, if you read all the players here," to which Libby added, "And it was just lovely."

Throughout the stories adoptive parents told, several themes emerge. Parents, even though struggling with openness, were able to identify positive attributes that contact gave their children. In many cases, levels of contact have waxed and waned over time, as each family's life circumstances changed. Maintaining contact can be

difficult logistically and can present some moments of vulnerability for the families involved. Nonetheless, no family who sought out contact voiced regret for having done so. Even with her family's struggles, Cari relayed the benefits openness has had on her family:

"I think it's really broadened our horizons because - I mean we're meeting not only just people but - I mean people we had never met but — [in terms of] class and educational background and — as well as different part of the country. And I guess Justin and I just sort of saw it as — it's like if we'd adopted from Korea, we would learn a lot about Korea. And we adopted from Kansas [chuckle] so we're learning a lot about Kansas... And so I think - maybe 'cause we come from a small family or whatever that we — it felt like it was enriching to us. We've sort of broadened our horizons.

RACE AND THE TRANSRACIAL ADOPTIVE FAMILY

All of the adult participants in this study are White and chose to adopt a child of color. They manage the changing complexities of adoption and being an adoptive family, as well as those issues related to race. For many of the families, a further layer is related to the fact that their child was adopted from the public child welfare system, often at an older age and often with some kind of special needs or vulnerabilities as a result of abuse or neglect. The choice to adopt a child from a racial or ethnic minority background clearly presents both challenges and rewards for the White adoptive parents in this sample. This section focuses specifically on the issue of race within the family and community context—the ways in which race comes up in family life or discussions, how children manage between majority and minority communities, the role of schools and role models, and parents' own experience and awareness.

Discussing Race and Ancestry

Having a different racial and biological heritage from one another can spark discussions about similarities and differences, and wishes and disappointments. Many adoptive parents remember their children voicing a desire to be biologically related to them at some point, and although not uncommon in adoptive families, is possibly made more complex because of race. Beth recalls her daughter, then around 6 years old, commenting on this:

You know, she did say to me once when she was really little — and I don't know what this meant, whether it was a racial thing or [what] — she said — was this. She said she always wished that I had birthed her. And I didn't know whether it meant because then we wouldn't stand out or... she felt like I was her mother. I don't know... And I mean she still feels that way in a way. Even when she — she knows that's not possible and all that. I feel that way about her.

Similarly, Jean recalls her son, when he was 3 or 4 years old, telling her “more always when he was younger about saying, ‘I wish that you – I wish I’d been born to you. I wish I grew in your tummy.’ That’s tough.” She also recalls him telling her his wish that they had common racial features, explaining, “‘I wish we were the same color.’ That was a phase that lasted quite a while.” In response to this, Jean recalls answering him by reminding him of the beauty of his own features.

Well, I always – I always countered it with telling him about how White people like to go out and get tans and — and how White people with straight hair are getting their hair permed and then... He was — he was pretty amazed and I said — you know, I said, ‘It would be nice if we were the same color so if we — you want to be the same color, how about if I just would switch to yours?’

In describing a moment when her 11-year-old daughter announced that she needed more books about African Americans, Abby came to understand that the pronouncement was about a larger issue.

I think it was a stage of her racial awareness, her self-awareness of feeling -- that something must have happened to make her realize or glimpse, just for an instant, that actually there aren't as many -- that she is actually not part of the majority, which she feels like most of the time. So there must have been something that somewhere she picked up on and -- I don't know. It feels kind of awkward sometimes when you read books about slavery and all that kind of thing....I mean, we talk about it like, isn't it awful that people did that to each other and -- and we talk a lot about -- some people have a really hard time with differences and they'll try to put other people in a box based on what they look like or you know -- I mean, we honor race and the differences at the same time as we -- that we have a lot to say about how you turn out. Because you're one color or another doesn't determine your path.

Adoptive parents have to find ways to discuss their children's ancestry with them, while reminding them that they are part of the adoptive parent's family history as well. Barbara describes discussing her child's racial and cultural background with her son:

Oh, it does because we — when we talk about — it's funny how it's — there's a dual thing going on here because when we talk about ancestors, for example, I always talk about Africans and I always talk about, too, the fact that most African American people — I don't know if you could say every single African American person in this country — but most African American people have some mixture of European in them as well. And so we talk about shared ancestry and not shared — alike and different. And then when I'm talking about — when I talk to him about his family and I'm meaning my parents and so forth and so on, sometimes he'll say, "Oh, well, that's your family, that's not my family."... 'Cause he's got — he has his family and he has his biological family and he has his ancestors of his family and he's got his birth ancestors and it's probably pretty confusing.

Although Barbara communicates that her family of origin is also his family, she is aware that he has a unique racial history separate from hers that he must feel free to explore:

I've always tried to really make sure that he's — identifies himself as an African American person and that he has positive feelings about that

identity and that he has positive – he’s got role models. I mean my best friend in the whole world is African American —... she’s got a son who’s 24 or 25 years old and we’ve always — and her husband’s African American. We’ve always done stuff with the family. He calls her Auntie and he’s Uncle. And we went to their son’s graduation ... a couple years ago. And I really want him to go to a historically Black college. I don’t know if it would be possible because of the learning disabilities and all the issues that he’s got but I would really like that for him. That is my goal.

For Cari and Justin, their interest in the fact that their daughter has native Hawaiian heritage is more about knowing the family background than about helping their daughter to identify with a minority culture per se.

Well, I do just in terms of, I guess, wanting her to know some of her heritage. Like we’re going to Hawaii this summer and we were going to try to meet up with her two aunts who live on some tiny island — I don’t know if it’s Lanai or what. And to me it wasn’t so much like she should know her Asian roots but it’s like she should know this sort of interesting side of the family. And I was hoping — my own agenda was I would really be able to grill these people about what’s this Hawaiian connection so that I would have the information for Emma. ‘Cause on her other side of the family there was a great-grandmother in Oklahoma that I spent some time with and I was able to make a family tree and understand where the — what part of Europe they came from, and I kind of wanted to do that for the other side. So that was my own agenda.... But I think the desire is larger than just the Asian part, which is... and I think it’s just — there’s just a richness there and — I mean to me even when we go to Oklahoma — that’s so alien to me that — to me that’s very rich ‘cause that’s as different to me as [chuckle] Hawaiian.

Linda relates her children’s histories to them, in part, by commenting on physical similarities between her daughters and their respective birth mothers.

And race, yes. Well, I make a big – well, it’s often in the context within a race, so I’ve made a point of saying – you know, when these topics come up, you know, that Ruby looks a lot like her birth mother. That’s why her eyes are so much more slanty. And we talk, we actually talk a lot about physical characteristics. Like [chuckle] I went to the orthodontist and I walked out and I shook Ruby’s hand and said, “Thank you for saving me \$4,000.” [Laughter.]

In addition to discussions about racial heritage or background, many adoptive parents described their efforts to learn about traditions and celebrations historically associated with their child's culture, and to incorporate them into family life. Barbara explains,

I've been the one who really has always pushed for Kwanzaa and soul food and music things and — to make sure that he's — Oh, my birthday was Saturday and I said, "You know, for a birthday present I want you to go with me to this blues and gospel concert." We went to a benefit concert yesterday afternoon. He made it through 'til the intermission at least. And he really — he enjoyed it. It was too long for him but he did enjoy it. But when we talked about going he — he was very reluc — he did not want to go. And I said, "It's a birthday present for me." And he had to tell me about eight times, "I'm doing this for you, Mom. I don't really want to go."

Similarly, Abby acknowledges her motivation to get her daughter involved with markers of African American culture. As she describes,

Actually, when she first came to me I was so gung-ho, I'm like, okay, I've got my African American child, we're going to church. And she was bored to tears, you know. Actually, I had a colleague at work whose father was a minister and -- in an all Black church. I was the only White person in the building. And, you know, we'd go up there and hang out and have lunch and like do her hair, like teach, you know, teach me how to do her hair and go to church with them. It was lovely, actually. [Laughter.] But Tyra started complaining about going to church and so -- I don't know.

In addition to seeking out community from the Black church, Abby also tried to participate in African American holidays:

And I was -- we were doing Kwanzaa and, you know, it was just like -- it just -- what we ended up doing was taking pieces of things and -- like, we had Kwanzaa decorations on the tree but we don't celebrate Kwanzaa per se. I mean, we like pay some attention to the values around Kwanzaa -- we talk about it at the time and they do at her school, as well. And it's just sort of -- she gets that there's a connection with African Americans in that way and that she's free -- if she were saying 'I really want to celebrate Kwanzaa,' then I'd be into it. Yeah. I was actually -- I was so happy to have an excuse to celebrate Kwanzaa.

On-Going Discussions of Race

Several parents explained that they bring up questions of race more than their children do. Beth explains,

It really hasn't been a — I mean I'm the one that always wanted to talk about it and they were like "Hmpf, here we go again, Mom, um-hm, boring, boring." But when they got into middle school then it was — it became more of an issue. We've always lived in a mixed community — a racially mixed area. They went to school with White kids, they went to school with Black kids, they went to school with South Sea Islanders. So it wasn't like, in a way, they were a fish out of water so — and since they were at the same elementary school for the same — over and over and over, I think it wasn't so much of an issue because we — everybody knew us. I think it was only as they got older. It became more of an issue for Ananda because she's darker. Jamal could possibly be taken for my son but Ananda's very dark. So the question always came up. Is that your mother?" But then it's true of kids who don't look like — who really don't look like their birth parents even though they live with their birth parents. And so she started inventing stories that I was her birth mother and her father was Black and he and I were divorced. That's what she would tell people. And then Jamal would say — he would tell them the truth and then they would — I remember overhearing them arguing about it. And I said, "Well, why did you say that?" "Well, I don't want to talk to people." She felt more it was a reflection about someone giving her up, that that's what — she didn't — the adoption, I think, was a stronger factor than race.

Similarly, Linda explains that race is ever-present in her family discussions, in large part because she and her husband bring it up.

See, in the family it comes up more than race but that's partly because we've been so up front about the race, I think. I'm not sure...Well, I think it's worth -- I think it's something that always bears talking about because I mean not only are they obviously adopted but then they're obviously not biologically related, although people keep asking us because of course in some ways -- I don't know.

For parents with younger children, opportunities to discuss race can arise in different, less overt ways. For example, Jane describes an interaction with her son, who has fairly light skin and is half White, half Latino:

Joshua, when he draws pictures of himself, he draws self-portraits, he always colors his skin very, very dark — very dark brown. And I go “Wow, that looks great, Joshua. Are you that color?” “Yeah [he says].” I say, “Okay, cool. I like your hairstyle.” And we talk about what he did to his hair. He makes his hair blue and spiky and stuff. But he always colors his skin very, very dark... That must be how he sees himself... He’s always done that. So I think in that way is how he shows what it means to him 'cause he doesn’t talk about it. Doesn’t say anything... and — I mean in the summertime we all say, “Wow, what a tan,” 'cause he has a beautiful tan.

Other parents described interacting with younger children over the actual tones of their skin. Abby remembers of her then 6-year-old African American daughter,

You know, she would be lying in bed -- I actually had to lie with her every night until she went to sleep, which is usually 10, for like the first -- I don’t know -- 11 months or so. But she was with me -- I remember one night she was saying -- she was really -- she was in first grade and she was talking about patterns and she said if there was a whole line of people like us then it would be peach, brown, peach, brown, peach, brown. [Laughter.] She’s always talking about I’m peach, not White, and that she’s brown, not Black.

Other parents had opportunity to address issues of racial difference with their children when out in public. Barbara provides an example:

But Dante is funny. We went to buy tamales in [urban area] and I was standing in line and he goes, when I got out, Dante says, “Do you know, I was the only Black person in there and you were the only White?” And I said well... We just go where we’re going, honey. And then we go to this Chinese restaurant – I don’t think it’s Chinese, I think it’s Vietnamese, and my ex-husband’s mother we still see and she’s in a convalescent home so we take her out in the wheelchair and everything. We are the only two White women in this place and he’s the only Black person and he always says I’m the only Black person here.

Moving Between Cultural Worlds

Children of color who have White parents sometimes develop a fluidity with which they move between two cultural worlds. Several parents described the way their children did so. Abby describes her daughter.

Her best friend is European American. ... But she has picked up a, a slang language with certain groups, like the Y in [one neighborhood] versus the Y at [another neighborhood]. She'll talk this language and... you know, she'll come home talking a certain way and I'll say does so and so talk like that, too? And she'll say yeah. And, it's almost like she's bilingual. [Laughter.] Because she's really -- she's adapted, she's adapted very well.

Abby adds, "She sort of has adopted a persona that she doesn't really use with us very much but I hear it when she's -- when she talks about what she said to somebody else, you can hear it." Similarly, Beth described her daughter as moving between "standard English" and "speaking ghetto." Reflecting on a conversation she had with her, she recalls, "She says, 'I don't do ghetto,' but she can speak ghetto just fine and moves between the two worlds pretty fluidly."

In reflecting on conversations with her 14-year-old son who was adopted when he was 5 years old, Jean remembers her son saying that he had "lost my ghettoness." But she continues, "Oh, but he turns it back on...he went to a school that it was heavy in African American, so he got all that." Jean explains that her son has access to both Black and White culture, explaining, "Yeah, yeah. He's cool on both fronts. In fact, his best friend is African American so that's good." In describing his own movement between communities, Bobby explains,

I mean, people always ask what race I am and I always say, like me and Mom had a conversation in the car. I'm half Black, half White and she said well, your skin is Black but right here is White so I will go I'm Black and White 'cause I'll be talking like... No, I just talk like regular 'cause I've been with her so long.

Some children, who have multiracial birth families, choose an identity for themselves that reflects both their multiracial heritage and adopted family. Paul describes his strategies in shifting how he identifies himself racially, particularly on

forms and applications. Reflecting on conversations he has had with his mother, he notes,

If I get an option where it says "other" I put it there. I don't know, you know, sometimes — a while ago—if...before Mom was talking about the box and how big of a issue it was for her 'cause it was like a big issue for her, and me, I didn't care. To her it was like the biggest thing in the world so... I don't know she was just saying, "you're mixed with so many things why just pick one?" That's just saying you're just this and you're not, you're all this other stuff. So basically when I think of it — every single time I see the box, I think of her. [Chuckle.] Before I put — before I was putting "Black" like when I was in — when I was in the Black high school and I was like wanting to be Black. I put the — you know. And, actually, now I don't — I don't know where I got all that 'cause I didn't care for a little bit and sometimes I put White, sometimes I put Black and then sometimes it says it said, "Mark one," I'd mark three just for the hell of it and now I just leave it blank.

In contrast to this, and perhaps best illustrating the way Paul perceives his identity as flexible, he explains that he sometimes also sees himself as White:

Yeah, sometimes. You know, it's like — I don't know, sometimes, you know, I'd want to be White, sometimes I feel like being Black. It's like every day it's like I feel like being something else. Oh, mostly now I just like — I don't know, like I said, I don't care but I don't know. Just — I don't know, I think it's funny just to mark the White box and when they look at me they — you know, obviously, I'm not just White so — it's cool. That's my way of just having a little bit of fun with [chuckle] — with that little section.

As a teen, Paul discovered that in addition to having White and Black ancestry, he also had Hispanic ancestry on his mother's side. He explains that he identifies himself as

half-Black, half-White is I think when I was staying there 'cause I didn't even find out I had any Latino in me until like halfway through high school. [Chuckle.] I was hella mad at my mom 'cause I never heard about that... She said — then I was Black, White, and Latino [chuckle] and I was — then I'd say I was Latino...[It was] interesting, yeah. I checked out some... Latino culture and stuff. I guess in [a nearby city] there's a lot of Latino people over there. We were actually thinking about getting me into a school over there.

Race and Schools

Schools are a significant place for children's socialization, both in terms of the amount of time spent there and the relationships formed. Adoptive parents were aware that their children's experiences at school had far-reaching effects, and that as parents of children of color their choices for schools were very meaningful. Many parents felt that they had to choose between schools with better learning opportunities but little diversity, and those with more racial and cultural diversity but less strong academics.

Sarah, the mother of 10-year-old Tyler who is Black, reflects on this issue:

His school is – the population there is half Hispanic. Well, not half. There's more Hispanic kids at that school than there are any other ethnicities this year for the first time. And the school's an okay school. It's not really bad and it's not real good, academically. It's just kind of middle of the road. And, you know, the other -- There's this whole White flight thing where people are leaving the schools in the city district that we're in and going to the outskirts, to the – I call them the "White bread" districts, because this is where a lot of the Hispanic and English second language kids are, and of course that impacts grades and the way things are taught. But it was never a question for me because I feel like yes, academics are important but so is learning how to get along in the world and the world is going to look a lot more like his school as he grows up than it does in all these districts outside. And I – and my nieces, you know, they're all in those districts and, you know, it's hard to -- I just don't think you get it unless your kid's of color, of some color.

At least one family opted to move to the less diverse area with the better schools.

Although they are happy with the academic opportunities their daughters have, they are aware of the loss of access to diversity. Libby explains,

[Not being bilingual.] That's probably the biggest regret. It would be better for Heidi and I think for us too to have a little more multicultural emphasis to life. I mean, you were asking earlier on about Heidi's birth family and they're blue collar and the white collar, how's that going to be different. Well, one of the restrictive things about being in our environment here is she has all the quote/unquote things money can buy kind of issues but the cultural mix, I mean, where her birth parents and grandparents live, you

know, the neighborhoods are much more integrated and there's a steady stream of Hispanic folks coming by 'cause [her birth father] is Spanish. And she's not going to get that here. She'll have to seek it out more, which is too bad. But on the flip side, we moved here for a real specific purpose of wonderful schools and it's a great neighborhood and all that. I guess it's just a tradeoff.

However, Libby and Michael's daughter Heidi feels supported in her efforts to claim a unique cultural heritage. In explaining how she feels comfortable as one of the only Mexican-American students, she notes,

There's people there who are different culture sort of too so I just feel like I'm just another one of those people, you know, 'cause there's tons of people that are like Irish and Croatian and Scottish and Swedish and Hawaiian... Well, sometimes our teacher asks us like – we had a chart up there, what our cultural heritage was and they put up so many things, so we sort of did.

Heidi also does not feel any particular connection to the only other Latino student in her class, explaining, “one guy in my class [is also Mexican], but he doesn't look like – like he's not that tan at all or anything. For her then, cultural and racial group membership is part of a plurality rather than an experience of being a numerical minority in a group of kids who all seem to share something inaccessible to her.

One family decided to change to a different, more diverse school but with mixed results. Trina's son Paul struggled while “he went for a year at the fancy, rich, White high school out there.” She described his discomfort:

[He] was very unhappy. There were very few kids of color there and he's very smart, as I said, but not highly academic and when he started getting feelings like if he didn't know the answer and he was the only Black kid in the class and he also didn't know the answer, it made him feel bad.

After he changed from the predominantly White high school to one that was almost entirely Black, he still did not feel at ease. Trina recalls,

So racially he fit in pretty well in that other high school. But culturally he didn't. He had grown up in [a small town] with mostly White people and he doesn't have much patience with the sort of ghetto scene or ghetto style of a lot of Black people he runs into. And as a result I think he doesn't have a lot of – I tell him sometime I think he's a racist 'cause I think that he – He doesn't mind the fact that he – 'Cause he knows he's very handsome and - I don't think he has a problem with being part Black. But I think he sees himself, he doesn't identify himself just as a Black person and he doesn't have a whole lot of respect for a lot of what goes on in the Black community but some of the time I have to say to him, that is just one piece of the Black community and it is – Because he just doesn't feel – He thinks they do stupid things and they act stupid.

Some parents who did not have adequately diverse communities opted to utilize outside services, including cultural festivals, summer programs, and heritage camps that would provide their children with the experience of fitting in. For example, Heidi, an 11-year-old girl of part Mexican descent describes her sense of belonging at Mexican heritage events:

Well, we in social studies talk about Mexican explorers, so I like telling about that stuff.... We had this Mexican festival sometimes that we go to. We've only gone to it once, I mean, twice. And it like makes me feel like I fit in... Like because the people there are Mexican and I am too so it doesn't feel like I'm sort of not – I'm the only person who isn't or something, like my parents aren't.

Bobby describes his experience of first feeling like others are racially suspicious of him, but also how validating heritage camp was:

It's like Michael Jackson over here, okay? Black and White, want to change his looks. I want to change my looks. Sometimes I do, sometimes I don't. I don't – I mean, going to a hair [salon] has really made me feel better because up to that I was kind of mad that I had a White mom. Ever since I came out here, it was like man, you're stupid, you're White, you don't know nothing. Well, when I went to heritage camp, and I saw all these little boys and little girls with White parents, I was like I'm not the only one. It made me feel a lot better. That's why I liked it so much, I want to go back there.

The Role of Role Models

In addition to what families feel that they get (or do not get) from their children's schools, many adoptive parents described the importance of specifically providing their children with mentors and role models who could help them build a positive racial identity. Sarah explains,

You know, I've always made an attempt to find Black professionals. You know, the first piano teacher he had was Black. She's actually my mom's neighbor. And there were no Black pediatricians that we could find at the time or Black dentists but his dentist is Hispanic and the pediatrician's a woman. I think she's Indian. I'm not sure. Just to let him know that, you know, you can see folks of color except – in other places than sports and - - And he will not play sports. He's always made that choice. He does not play sports and that's a big reason he doesn't feel like he has friends 'cause all the boys are playing sports.

Beth felt that she was able to build a racially diverse system of social support, but feels some regret for not actively seeking out programs to provide mentoring. In contrast to family and friends, she feels that mentoring would have offered a closer, more personal connection to someone of her children's race.

I would say that one thing I wish I had done differently — try to get more involved in the Big Brothers and Big Sisters sooner. I waited too long and by the time it happened they weren't interested. I'm really sorry about that. [I wanted them to have] a positive role model of someone from their race who they could interact with and share family stuff with. 'Cause that — no matter how idealistic I want to be, the truth is there is a lot of nurturing in same community. That's a — I think that's a fact whether we like it or not. [Have they had any access to that?] Oh, sure. We've got friends but it's not — I don't have a lot of contact with my own birth family and they don't have aunts and uncles. Friends of mine are their aunts and uncles but they don't have like someone who's really very special to them. And that would have been nice.

Linda describes seeking out African American role models by building a diverse community of non-White families to serve as a support system. Describing her

children's access to Black role models, she recalls, "they've had contact with other Black parents and there was a Black teacher for a while at their school." Although they lost access to the more diverse school they attended, Linda still prioritizes providing a multiracial community for Ruby and Deena.

Abby also felt a responsibility to find positive Black role models for her daughter, but for a different reason. She felt that such models were needed to off-set her daughter's prior negative experiences moving between multiple foster placements with African American families who did not keep her.

My biggest fear was actually that she would have this complex of like -- because everyone she had been placed with, except her stepmother -- but that everyone she had lived with and had dumped her had been African American, and then here's her savior the White woman. I was really -- I didn't -- I really didn't want her to see it that way, to associate my race with me being her forever mom. You know, that there's some trait about being White that makes me more reliable. And I don't think she's internalizing that -- and I guess unfortunately [her stepmother who did care for her] happens to be White also, and so is [my partner] -- but she does have other positive African American role models. And thank God she actually has some -- several really positive male African-American role models... Two of the teachers at school that she's really close to are African American men, and one is gay. She doesn't know that but she sort of -- she will later.

Race as Children Get Older

As children get older, issues of identity become more prominent in general. Being a child of color with White parents adds additional layers of complexity to the process of identity formation. Many parents recognize that although race is not currently a strong issue, it may become increasingly important as their children try to understand themselves and shape their own identity. Parents differ as to when they think that race

will play a stronger role in their child's life. Jane speculates of her 10-year-old Latino son Joshua,

It could be as he goes in school and he's taking Spanish or a foreign language or whatever and those issues are brought up when they start learning about Puerto Rico and Mexico and all these places that he might be able to say, "Oh." He might make some connection there on some level. 'Cause I think he's probably part Native American as well from her side of the family — way back but — so we've told him. I've said, "You're probably Native American, Joshua, and Latino." "Oh, cool, I'm part Indian." He really focused on that... 'cause they get to ride horses and have spears and stuff. That was real important.

As he approaches his teen years, Jane explains her anticipation that questions of identity and group membership may become harder:

Well, that's when everyone picks you apart... They pick you apart in junior high. "Who are you?" And "You've got this color skin and this color hair and this color eyes," and, yes, I'm sure that at that point... Not yet. Not yet. He might be. But right now he's just — he's really cute, a lot of girls like him—and he's just 10.

Similarly, Linda expects that as her daughters get older, race will become more important to them.

Right now. Yeah. They're both — the 12- and 13-year-old factor. I suspect that race will become more significant as they get into high school. It certainly was in my experience. You know, for kids in general race became more important in high school.

As Linda expects that race will become increasingly important as they get older, she is also aware that as her daughters enter puberty, they are beginning to shape their identities:

And so like right now I have to say I think that probably, you know, it seems like the identity part is really starting to loom quite important there, 'cause like Ruby just has hit puberty.... But I don't know how much thinking they've done around their birth family -- in terms of identity or not. There was a time when she told me that she really wished she could meet her mother, her birth mother and she wished she could talk to her and she

really missed her. She was telling me that a lot, but when she was much younger. I think and also as far as race is concerned, I think that's really coming up, but I think really what's coming up is gender identity right now for them. [More than racial identity and more than adoption?] Well, it's all part of the mix, isn't it? I just think that the girl thing is really probably bubbling more on the surface so whether -- That's all I can say. I can't make anything conclusive about it. You know, puberty issues, the kinds of issues that come up around girls and groups of girls and --

In anticipating Tyler's adolescence, Sarah describes how she is bracing herself for future problems:

Just to expect a bumpy road and, you know, remember that life is hard for teenage boys and it's triply hard for Black teenage boys. And now I wonder what's it going to be like if his first prom comes along or his first dance where he takes a date and he asks a White girl and the White girl's parents don't want her to go? Or if he asks a Black girl and the Black girl's parents, "Ew, his parents are White?" I mean, what is that going to be like for him? You know, but we can't stop that train.

For Paul, a Black high school graduate, issues of race did arise around dating during adolescence. In the following exchange, he recalls a relationship he had in high school with a White girl whose parents were disapproving.

Her mother — I swear her mother hated me... Hated me with a passion. Actually, that's — that's partially why I ended it is 'cause — I guess what was happening — I didn't know too much about it but she — I guess she was lying to her mom and telling her other things so she could go with me places and — I didn't really know the whole story. And I guess one time she lied to her mother and she came over here. I was like "What, you lied?" So I try and take her back, right, you know, to do the right thing... And so her mother, I guess, called her friend's house and found out she had lied. She was there [when I] pulled up. So, basically, I took the whole rap for the whole thing. She thought it was all me. I was making her lie and, uh — no matter what she said... "No, it was me." You know, she didn't care. It was like all directed right at me.

One way that the increased awareness of race and the importance of social acceptance manifested itself was in children's feelings about being in public with their White parents. Sarah remembers,

And he has told us – and there’s been times where he hasn’t wanted to go out to dinner with us and spells of him not wanting to be in public with us very much and I’m sure it’s that he comes at the different levels of getting what our family looks like. He has said from time to time that the only place he really feels comfortable when he’s not at home is at school. It’s not at church, it’s not doing this, that or the other thing. It’s at school, which tells me that we made the right decision to keep him there.

Abby remembers her daughter’s efforts to deny she was her mother. She recalls, “We had the same thing when she was at the [YMCA] and we’d go to pick her up she made it so she came out in the hall and so -- kids wouldn’t see her [with a White mom].”

In discussing this issue, Bobby, explains the experience of having a White single mother:

Well, when I was in elementary school when I was living with [her], people would go, people would ask all these questions like why is your mom White and you’re Black and like this one time, I really got sick of it [and said] ‘cause... my mom threw me in the toaster and I got – I was White before and then I just turned Black, okay?’ And they were just like, ‘you’re weird, we’re not talking to you no more.’

Crossing Color Lines: Parental Awareness of Racism

The previous sections have dealt with the issue of race at the level of the family and the child’s own experiences. Parents, even those with a history of involvement with social justice activities, also have a developmental process related to understanding and dealing with racial issues and realities. Some parents described the ways that raising a child of color made them more outspoken against racism or injustice. Linda remembers challenging a teacher who assigned a book she found inappropriate.

...this is actually more of a race question, but we did have to go in and her – this is Deena’s teacher -- had a list of reading books and one of them was, of all things, the Rudyard Kipling book Kim... Well, you know Kipling then. He’s a colonialist and White Man’s Burden, and all that... Yeah. Well, Kim is about a White boy in India who masquerades as an Indian and darkens his skin and well, we had to go in and say we didn’t think it

was an appropriate book for her. Actually, what we were really trying to say is look, if you're going to put this book on anybody's reading list, either you teach it or you don't teach -- you know, or you don't put it on because, you know, just saying -- Okay. And the thing that stuck with me is, he is a really good teacher, but he just said, "Well, you know, I remember reading this as a kid. I liked it." And I thought -- that is completely beside the point.

Similarly, Jane describes how she answers questions or comments about her children's racial difference when out in public:

I don't know. I mean it's obvious — unless — obviously all of our kids were adopted and that's the only thing I have really witnessed. No one has been touchy or said negative things about the composition of the kids or asking — I mean some people who -- I appreciate just honest questions more than trying to manipulate me to say something instead of being straightforward about it. The people who dance like that, I let them just string themselves along... Hang themselves because, you know what, if you're going to be this way, I'm — none of your business. But [if] people [say] "Wow, did you adopt your kids?" I go "Yeah." "Well, that's awesome." "Great." [But if they say,] "Gee, her skin is so beautiful." Well, what are you saying? What does that mean? Obviously I know... Yes. And I [just say]— "Yes, it's wonderful." [rather than talk about adoption] You know, I got to protect these kids and myself.

Barbara also remembers times when people in public places reacted to the racial difference between her and her son. She recalls,

Oh, yeah. Like he sat in the car or some people will look at us when we — But they've done that right from the beginning. I mean we'd be in a store and somebody would be you his mother? Yes. You're White. What was your first clue? I mean, -- Yeah. But we get that all the time so he's kind of used to it.

Although White parents who adopted transracially often described their increased awareness of racism, most described their increased consciousness as a benefit. Sarah explains her sense of appreciation for the changes that raising her son has brought her:

I wouldn't trade it. I mean, I love my boy and it certainly opened my -- I mean, [my husband] and I thought we were pretty liberal but then when you start looking around at everything, all that we've learned through all of the workshops and stuff we've had, and... it's racist. It's just different —

different pieces and different levels of it and once you know that, then you can deal with it. But it's – I mean, it really has changed my life in a lot of ways.

In accounting for her activism around questions of race, Sarah explains that she has to remain vigilant because of her awareness that her son cannot stop dealing with it.

Although she acts as an advocate, she is disappointed by her extended family.

... it gets hard to fight that battle all the time, but I can step away because I'm White. Tyler can't ever step away from fighting that battle, so I feel like a coward when I don't pursue all of that. And another thing that's hard is trying to get – I mean, I've watched movies and stuff that are really hard for me to watch, not the kind any of us sort of want to watch but I think I have to because Tyler is who he is, you know, like "Malcolm X" and "Boys In the Hood" and those kind of things. And it's really hard to get my family, extended family, to realize that watching that stuff doesn't mean you condone it but you kind of have to watch it to understand all the pieces of it. And I can't quite go there. I mean, my dad gets it, I think. It's too hard for them so they don't – they don't have to deal with it so they don't.

In the following exchange, Sarah describes her increasing awareness that her Black son faces different threats than would a White boy:

If anybody said what's the one most surprising thing about being a parent, a parent in this way, it's that I never expected to worry so much about the physical safety of my child, never, never expected to have to worry about it, you know, and getting shot because he's in the wrong place at the wrong time or -- And I guess that's the message we've tried to give him since he could understand, you know, if ever a situation doesn't feel safe you've got to remove yourself. If it's on the playground, if it's at a party, you just have to remove yourself and if the cops tell you to do something you do it even if you don't agree and we'll figure it out later. You do what they say.

Barbara also takes steps to try to protect her son:

We talk about things, but as I said, I'm very open and I tell him about stuff in advance. I think that's – About racism and all of that. Since he's being brought up in a White home where I don't have that problem, I can speed down a street without being pulled over. I tell him he's going to have tinted windows because they can't see you and they're not going to pull you over as much. I mean, these are all little things I got along the way listening to

African American parents. That it's harder for African American males and you need to be respectful if anybody stops you, you don't get smart with them because you're going to get smacked or taken into jail. All these – I keep telling him things so not to make him afraid but to make him not think, I'm White and I can do whatever because he has a sense of empowerment. I'm empowered, I can do that, I'm entitled to this. But to somebody else who has the power, you're not entitled so we just talk about culture and I've taken him to things.

Parents Describe What Is Needed to Raise a Child of Color

Having developed a sense of what is required to raise a child of color, at least one adoptive couple described their ambivalence about watching someone they knew who did not think critically about questions of race adopt children of color of their own.

Linda explains,

I have a strong opinion about [who should adopt] actually, just from these friends of ours who were considering adopting, because the child that they were really being strongly considered -- strongly urged to consider, was a biracial Black child. And the most awkward part about it is we couldn't really give a recommendation. They're a great family but I could never see them raising a Black child. So that's my first point, is that even really, really nice people may not be right for a Black child.

Similarly, Jean feels that anyone who is considering adopting a minority child needs to be cognizant of what is necessary to prepare him or her.

And just like I see so many of my parents in my program, they say that the child's the most important thing, but it's really the adult [being] very selfish, I want to love this child. Well, you've got to get real because you want to love this child, but don't expect the child to just say, "Oh, I love you." Because you're going to get hurt. If you're going to be adopting transracially, find out about [his] culture. It's like they told me, you're adopting this Black kid... and he didn't want to be an Oreo and I don't want him to be an Oreo.

Abby always had a desire to adopt a child transracially and felt that was an important responsibility. In doing so, she is aware that she did not communicate adequate concern about the process to her social worker.

I don't know. It started from the time I was 16 I knew I was going to adopt and it was probably going to be an African American child and -- yeah, part of that was because it -- because there are more of those -- little did I know that anybody who wants to adopt an infant has a wait, but I knew that it was much longer for White infants and that African American children had a harder time finding [homes]. So, this was way pre-the-career [as a social worker]. I had some awareness and -- in fact, it had sort of gone underground. It wasn't like any sort of conscious goal but it had always been there... I felt in some way very prepared -- like I already had books and stuff that were -- I was very happy to get the chance to read to her. [Laughter.] I had had them for years and years and -- I mean, I think the biggest insult that I got was when [the agency] actually expressed a concern to me about my lack of -- I don't know, I guess I wasn't expressing enough outward -- I don't know. Maybe I wasn't freaked out enough for them about her race. And I was doing my own process. I mean, I was taking it really seriously, but at the point when they said, 'We don't think you're taking this seriously enough,' I was just devastated.

In discussing what it takes to raise a child of color, Sarah described the ways she feels that she has become an advocate for her son but also points to the fatigue that accompanies her efforts to gain knowledge. She has an internal struggle for balance over how much to focus on her son's needs and issues and how much to meet her own personal and professional needs.

The shift is the challenge and not knowing what to do with it or to do anything and just -- You know, and I'm not proud to say this but I spent so much time and so much energy willingly, with great enthusiasm, you know, reading everything I could get my hands on about, you know, about racism, about Black experience, Black authors, just everything I could to surround myself and immerse myself in stuff that I thought would -- Tyler would need to know, would help me understand what lies ahead for him. And I'm tired. I'm just -- you know, 'cause David doesn't do very much of that and I kind of impart it to him and I'm tired of it. And --Well, I mean, it's like saying you're tired of being a parent in a lot of ways but it's -- we've hit a very rough stage and I've also -- you know, I've kind of had this plateau in my work life for all those years and I got promoted in October and I love what I'm doing now and really there's more to life than just learning, just educating myself about what Tyler needs. And I feel bad about that but I don't know, do all mothers who have kind of sacrificed something in the work environment feel that way when their kids get to that place where

they're getting more independent of am I just – am I balking for another reason. I have no idea. I give myself headaches trying to figure it out.

Finally, some parents talked about the fact that it may take different qualities to raise a child of one racial background compared to another. Libby and Michael describe a situation many years ago when they met a birth mother whose half Black child would be freed for adoption.

Libby: We had interviewed a birth mother where the birth father was Cajun, African American, and we wondered, you know, can we do this, you know, are we equipped? Here we are liberals and are we really, you know, awful, bigoted people inside? So we met with [people at the agency and] it was very helpful to talk through the emotions and that no, it didn't mean that we were awful people if we decided that this birth mother wasn't the right one... That that wasn't the right one at the time, that we weren't ready for African American and it was a couple years later with [our second child] and we didn't think twice about Hispanic.

Michael: I remember we tried to put our finger on it at the time and the closest we'd come is just didn't feel right, and that's kind of nebulous but it was hard to get closer to it then. It just didn't feel right at the time.

Libby: And some differences are bigger than others and the range of issues that you end up with, depending on which race you end up crossing, are different. And we just weren't – we didn't, at the time we didn't have a particular base, a diverse group of friends where we could say oh, well we already have this support network in this particular race but we don't have it in that. We didn't have it in any race.

Michael: We were also struggling with, you know, does this make us terrible people, would we ever do an interracial adoption and we didn't know at the time, just we knew that didn't feel right and would something else feel okay down the road, we didn't know. So we were sort of struggling with will we ever do that, does this represent some horrible bias that we had or, you know, what's it all about.

After struggling with their decision, they adopted a White infant and then adopted a Hispanic infant a few years later.

Conclusion

Adoptive parents of children of color described both the challenges they faced and rewards they reaped from the experience of raising a child of color. The challenges circumscribed questions of how to best help their children develop a complete sense of themselves, which included identified needs to provide them with role models from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds to helping them understand the multiple family histories they have. In addition to rewards of having children, the experience of raising a child of color specifically helped many parents develop skills to identify and speak out against social injustice and broadened their social networks in ways they might not have, had they not adopted transracially. Some even described a transformation in how they viewed themselves racially and how they have newly prioritized diversity in their lives. Exemplifying this, Jean, notes, “We’re an African American family, yeah. I try — I like to have Passover celebrations every year and I really try to make sure there’s more Black faces than White....”

In concluding this section, it is also essential to understand that while race is an important way people organize their identity and is a system that dramatically shapes one’s life opportunities and experiences, it is also only one issue among many. For many of these children, partly depending on their pre-adoption background, issues of trust, abandonment, or adoption remain equally salient. Illustrating this, Abby explains of her daughter:

I don't doubt that she will struggle with some aspects of her racial identity because I don't think there's any aspect of her identity that she won't struggle with, just because of the start she had and -- at a really crucial time in her life she lost everything, all her stability, everything. And so anything that's a part of her life she's going to -- is going to be filtered

through those experiences. And so -- yeah, she probably won't have quite as healthy a racial identity as she would have had she not gone through that but at the same time -- I don't know. I mean, I try to think of it in terms of having the expectation that she will probably always have abandonment issues or -- just how to prepare her for her own life and what kind of trigger issues she might have. And sometimes I think she's going to overcome it all and be like just absolutely remarkable like -- so -- she definitely has that in her and -- if she can get out of her own way and if I can get out of the way a little bit too. So -- I mean, I don't feel I guess -- I think part of it -- I don't know exactly what I want to get across. It's not that I don't take her racial identity development seriously. I just -- I guess I just have to take it in stride [like] everything else.

SERVICES AND SUPPORT

Many factors and issues influenced the kinds and amounts of services and supports that families felt they need and that they actually receive or use over time. The major factors that influence this focus around the type of adoption, whether public or through another method, parents' reasons for adoption, the child's pre-adoption history, and the child and family's postadoption needs. This section is divided between pre- and postadoption experiences.

Pre-Adoption

Prior to adopting their children, the parents in this study sought out and received services and supports in terms of both emotional and informational needs. Some services met both preparation needs simultaneously, while others were more specific. In some cases, parents reflected back to supports they wish they had gotten. In most cases, preparing for the placement of a newborn, compared to an older child, entailed different needs.

Most commonly, parents reported spending a lot of time "researching" adoption, both to educate themselves about different options and to prepare for what to expect

after their child arrived. This occurred primarily through reading literature about adoption and adoptive families. Jane, for example, spent a year reading and thinking about options after realizing that she would not be able to have a child biologically.

“I did that for a year and then another year I just researched adoption – took me a year. I wanted to research exactly – because there’s so many different ways. At that time there was private, there was agency, there was international, and I did all – and then there was just the – the county.... I went to all of these meetings, I got all the materials. I talked, I read, and I – after a year of research then I decided I would try the private adoption route and that’s how we – that’s what we did.”

Based on what she and her husband learned during their year of preparation they felt ready to proceed with adoption. Sarah also did a lot of research and reading prior to the placement of her Black son Tyler. “I have to say that book – can’t think of the name of it – *Different and Wonderful* by the Hobsons. Do you know that book? It’s my Bible.”

Many parents attended support groups with other potential adoptive parents. Adults in these groups shared information they learned through various seminars or workshops, helped each other troubleshoot situations, and provided invaluable emotional support. In some cases, the groups lasted long past the adoption placement. Jane continued to occasionally visit the group she attended after the adoption of her son so that she could share her positive experience with others. Cari and Jason were part of the same support group for 10 years.

Well, we did the [group] – the adoption support group, which we still – let’s see, we started meeting in 1993. We’ve been meeting for 10 years. And so – I mean this is like the adoption support group success story because five of the couples kept meeting and then we all adopted one child in 1995 – all of us. And so by the end of the year we were all complete. And then we went through the second adoption and even deciding – ‘cause we’re older parents – should we adopt a second time – and supported each other through that. And now it’s sort of become kind of a parents’ group.

In addition to reading and support groups, the parents reported attending a number of workshops or information sessions most relevant to their own situations. Some of the workshops focused on practical issues such as how to care for a baby, while others tapped into adoption-specific issues including anticipating how to talk to your child about adoption, and dealing with issues around racism and being a transracial adoptive family. Awareness of these supports came through social workers, others in the adoption process, and friends and family.

Some parents sought counseling as they were contemplating adoption. Libby and Michael thought through questions of race early on in their process to determine whether they were comfortable adopting transracially.

We had interviewed a birth mother where the birth father was Cajun, African American, and we wondered, you know, can we do this, you know, are we equipped? Here we are Berkeley liberals and are we really, you know, awful, bigoted people inside? So we met with [counselors at a community organization] and it was very, very – they're wonderful people. It was very helpful to talk through the emotions and that no, it didn't mean that we were awful people if we decided that this birth mother wasn't the right one. And then we met [the birth mother whose baby we adopted] and it was such a strong connection that that really took care of it.

Parents who adopted children from the public child welfare system often had different kinds of issues to deal with in preparation for adopting their child. Rather than anticipating the arrival of a newborn, and all of the feelings and needs, these parents imagined the arrival of an older child with multiple special needs. In most cases, their child had already experienced life in a number of different homes with different caregivers, and preparing for adoption meant quickly getting up to speed with the background of the situation as well as current issues and struggles. For example, Jean

was suddenly notified of a required upcoming educational assessment when she hadn't even known that her son was in a special program.

As the parents in this study reflected back to the pre-adoption phase, they were able in hindsight to verbalize some of the things they wished they had learned or done before their children came to live with them. In some instances, it was for more background information about their child or their child's birth family, while in others it was for better overall preparation. Practicing openness with little information ahead of time about how families negotiate the experience was voiced as a missing piece for a number of people. One parent suggested a video to fill some of the gaps.

I'm thinking that a videotape would be really a convenient way to do it. That you could – no matter where a family would be — you could send a couple videotapes or just one big one where you'd have birth parents talking and birth parents were talking about what it was like to just relinquish at the beginning, how it changed down the road, and then you could have kids who were adopted talking and you could have people like me talking about what it was like at the beginning, what it's like now, and what are the important things to remember and — that should be a gift that all adoptive families would get to have.

Some parents voiced disappointment with the system and institutional structure as a whole. Abby, whose daughter Tyra came to her with numerous emotional and behavioral issues, felt that the child welfare system should have done more to support them prior to and after Tyra's placement.

Okay, ideal situation. Everybody knows how bad this kid's problems are and then are able to, as a team, figure out a way to make it work. I felt, in a way, like -- I felt used in a way. And this is the way that the system is set up and I'm part of the system now and I have the inside view of the way that works and how it happened. It's not anybody's intention. But by default, you step up to the plate and you take a really disturbed kid who's on her way to residential care then everybody goes -- there's this -- the system goes, 'Whoa, at least that's one out of the way. We've got 4,000 more.' And so there's no real attempt to say -- to take a real systems view

of it, to say, okay, well, obviously it's preferable for this child to be in family-based care. What do we have to do to make that work? There's no, 'What do we have to do to make that work?' What do we have to do -- you know, I felt like because I was saying there's no way I'm giving up on this kid that everybody else was able to sleep better. And I didn't get my needs met.

Overall, parents were able to consider what they probably most needed in order to prepare for the arrival of their child. But this insight was only available to them in retrospect, after knowing their particular child and their particular family's experiences. All desired general emotional and informational support, but the unique backgrounds and situations of each child and the child's birth family could not be fully understood until after the child's placement.

Postadoption

Parents' reasons for adopting, and adoptive families' needs vary significantly. There is not one particular answer about what services and supports would satisfy or best help all families. Rather, the participants in this study help to highlight the fact that a broad base of assistance and support is needed that can be tailored to individual needs. These services generally fall under the headings of emotional support, informational support, and concrete aid, but there is often overlap between categories. Additionally, over time families' needs change and evolve. The formal role of the adoption agency ends; community agencies can become active players, and informal supports from family and friends become vital for many families. In many cases, it is only years after the adoption that parents have clarity and the ability to reflect on what they needed early on. Abby states this by saying, "As things got better then I realized what would have been really helpful. [Laughter.] ...I got the best that people knew to

give – but really I didn't understand until I lived with her so I understood why other people didn't get it either. But I'm a different person in terms of my perspective on what adoptive families need.”

Many families receive Adoption Assistance Payments from the County to offset some of the costs involved in raising a child with special needs. In at least one case, the County continued to be involved with services and supports off and on over a number of years. For example, Beth's daughter Ananda has had many emotional and behavioral difficulties since her adoption. Beth has successfully sought help with transitions to schools, payment for private counseling services, and links to treatment professionals. Despite this help, at the age of 17, Ananda has developed a drug problem, has been in trouble for stealing and forging checks, has been violent and threatening toward her mother, and has run away.

Interviewer: Do you think there's any services they could have provided the kids that would have stop-gapped any of what has happened in Ananda's teen years?

Beth: I think not – [the County] was willing to do anything and everything for me. I have not a – they are wonderful. They were wonderful. I was perhaps at fault. I should have understood really what I was – I should have insisted maybe on Ananda's therapy. I didn't understand –... It took me a long time to admit that Ananda was really seriously ill.

Beth had no intention of staying in such close contact with social workers through the county where she adopted her children but has been thankful for their willingness to provide her family with services and support.

Many other families have found that they need formal involvement with community agencies or organizations to support them. Barbara's son Dante was adopted at birth through a private agency, and doesn't have a history of abuse or

neglect. However, when he was young they began to realize that he had some kind of learning or psychiatric problems. He began seeing a psychiatrist, taking medication, and getting special services at a small school. They also

have somebody coming in – a behavior management counselor who’s been on board since Dante was in first grade who comes every Friday.... He’s been great. He’s an African American former college football player and wonderful role model, and Dante is very attached to him.

Additionally, Barbara began attending a support group for parents with children similar to her own. She found that getting support for her own experience and needs was critical to parenting her son.

Jean and Bobby have also needed a lot of formal community involvement. Unlike Dante, Bobby did experience abuse and neglect, and a history of multiple placements. This made it difficult for Jean to understand the source of Bobby’s difficulties. She didn’t know whether to attribute his problems to race, or adoption, or his history, or some combination of factors.

Because I was White, he was Black, was it because he was adopted? Was it because of the placement? Did he have attachment disorder? I mean, was it because he was in an abused and neglected circumstance? What was it? Or was it because he didn’t have a brother and sister? Because he kept wanting me to adopt somebody, he wanted a sister. So I never knew exactly, but I kept trying. I mean, we have tried anything, anything. There’s this thing, it’s balancing. You do a lot of figure 8s and things like that with your hands and all this and balancing. We tried that I mean we’ve tried therapy, different approaches in therapy. We’ve tried of course sports. I mean, we did the sports, the Big Brothers. Whatever it is I will try. And then the school district couldn’t tell me what was wrong with him, it’s just they couldn’t take care of him. Then I had him tested and her recommendation was that he needed a social skills kind of class and that just have him examined by a developmental optometrist and that’s when we found out that he had the visual organizational problems and that probably impacts his reading ‘cause he reads and he jumps and goes back and all this other stuff.

Getting to the bottom of the issues has taken perseverance and patience, and time.

Families with children who are functioning well in their environment and do not face a host of behavioral or emotional challenges have more liberty to explore other kinds of community supports. Many parents described attending family camps or workshops, or community events that support alternative families. Jane and her husband have worked to integrate their children of color into the Jewish community to which they belong.

Interviewer: The temple that you go to – are there other kids of color?

Jane No. No. Just us.

Interviewer: What is that like?

Jane: So far, so good. We have – the kids in our congregation are – I mean we've got some really, really blonde kids, blonder than Nick – just little whities – all the way through Michelle and then a lot of kids who look a lot like Joshua – dark hair, dark eyes.

Interviewer: Has that really been an issue?

Jane: No it hasn't been an issue because we've been there so long, we're part of the community, everybody knows us, everybody knows the kids.

Jane also pointed out the ways she sees Judaism becoming more multiethnic. In reflecting on a Chanukah party she and her children attended, she comments, "It was – I mean I'd never seen anything like it. And I told my father – a New York Jew, my father. 'Dad, you couldn't believe it. There were these three Black rabbis who were singing the Sh'ma in gospel.'" She adds, "the face of Judaism is really changing...because of a lot of intermarriage, there's a lot of adoption."

As with all families who have children, adoptive families are deeply affected by the reactions and behaviors of their own families. Some adoptive parents described

their families as an important source of support over the years. For example, Sarah, reflecting on whether her parents consider her son Tyler to be their grandchild, Sarah notes,

Absolutely, absolutely. I think that in many ways, I think my dad favors Tyler I would never say that to my sister and brother but, you know, he's easy. He's not high maintenance and part of that might be because when you're a single child you learn how to be pretty resourceful at taking care of yourself and entertaining yourself.

Sarah attributes her parents' acceptance of her son in part to their historical commitment to racial equality. She remembers her father's political action during her childhood:

I can remember when – I ... lived in the first subdivision over there and there were probably 20 houses or something like that. And I can just remember one night my dad, he wore a hat in those days. He would come home usually late for dinner and put his hat and his coat away and this night after dinner he went and got his hat and went out the door again. And I remember asking my mom where he was going and – or him – asking somebody where he was going and I think mom said he was going to a meeting. And when he came home later I asked him about it and he said he'd gone to a neighborhood meeting to make sure that anybody who was – anybody who was capable of buying a house in that subdivision should be able to live there. And what it boiled down to was a Black family had bought the house behind my mom and dad and all the neighborhood was trying to keep them out. They didn't want them to live there. And then this was late '50s. You know, I didn't think a lot about it. I was only probably 9.

This kind of behavior over the years provided Sarah and her husband David with a model for the treatment and worth of all people. When they were considering adoption, it felt natural to them to be open to raising a child of any race or ethnicity.

In contrast to Sarah's family, Abby was surprised that her parents, who are from the South, have become so comfortable with her daughter. Initially, she recalls, her parents were cautious about developing a relationship with Tyra. Abby reflected on the

significance of her parents giving her daughter books about racial and social diversity as a symbolic gesture of acceptance. She describes their transformation:

My brother, actually, at one point was married and had a stepchild that my parents were really close to and they got divorced and that relationship was severed. So when I adopted her actually, my mom was really, really hesitant. You know, she was -- it was hard for her, because she so afraid that something would happen, that she would lose Tyra if she started to love her. But, as far as the race stuff, they've been amazing. I mean they - she like goes to this -- this guy E. B. Lewis, whose watercolors just make my mouth water. I mean, they're just so beautiful and I actually took the cover of this one because I want to have it mounted -- I mean, this is the kind of book that she has given Tyra all along. And so, it's just, it's not, they don't deal with, necessarily with issues. It's just people, you know, and just beautiful, beautiful books. And she's -- we've got a bunch of these kind of things and -- but, but in the early period before we had such a collection this... I mean, they had -- their trepidations were -- I wouldn't say they had logical concerns like you know how are we going to handle this if this comes up and, you know, but they are completely supportive.

Cari and Justin discussed the way that Cari's parents, an elderly White Jewish couple, developed their own grandparent relationship with their children in ways that acknowledge their different histories. She noted that "I guess one way that [race] comes up that's kind of funny is that my dad will say something about -- I don't know how he puts it but it's sort of like his grandchildren aren't neurotics, they're not Jewish." She continues,

I guess so but it's kind of like, yeah, they're not -- they're not going to -- they're not neurotic or whatever 'cause they're--they're Gentile... So -- but I mean it's said lovingly. But - yeah. I don't know, it's sort of like his grandchildren -- I guess like any grandparent, they have like this special status so nobody can criticize them or --[chuckle] -- harm them or -- anyway.

In contrast to these stories, some of the families voiced surprise or disappointment in the reactions of their own families of origin. For example, Barbara described her disappointment in her own mother's reaction:

I wished for more support from my mother. When he was born she wasn't able to – in fact, her best friend who lives out here confided in me — inappropriately, I must say — but she did confide in me that my mom had said, “Oh, she's adopting a Black baby and I don't know if I can ever get over that — the difference.” And the friend said to her, “Oh, after you get to know the baby you'll just love him. You won't even see the skin color.”

In part, Barbara became increasingly aware of her mother's poor attitude because she could compare it to the treatment of her sister's child. She explains how her sister's son, “who's a year and a half older than Dante,” is treated differently.

And it's painful for me how – how there's really kind of favoritism. My mother is there often in New Jersey. And birthdays and if my sister's working and needs some extra help, she's there. And I — it's not just the adoption. I mean I think there's some — my sister and my mother are more comfortable together than I am with my mother. But be that as it may, when it affects my child — Yeah, so that — it's not as painful to me as it was but it — it's — yeah, I would have wished for something different there but then she's giving all she can and she's got her limits and that's it. I can't change that.

Jean also felt that her own family was not supportive of her son Bobby, not necessarily because of race or adoption per se, but because he was adopted from foster care. She describes the assumptions from her sister and community members that her son's struggles in school were signs of a larger underlying medical problem.

My sister, she wanted to label him fetal alcohol. She kept saying he has fetal alcohol and he has all the symptoms of that and that's what's wrong with him and we just don't know what kind of thing you've bought and all this other crap. And then when we were having so many problems in the school because he went from a elementary school in the magnet program which had 300 kids, and he didn't get accepted at the magnet school we were on the list for, so I had to find another middle school for him. So we went around, I looked at the different schools, and we went on a tour of one. It was near here...so we got a childcare permit and he went to that. Well, he went from this nice little nurturing environment to 2,000 kids and oh, my God, it – The whole year, I mean, if I got through a week without getting a phone call from the dean that Bobby was in trouble, I mean, I was lucky. Anyway, it was just horrible and he – Just that whole thing was such a mess through that time period. My sister was not – She gave no

support whatsoever. In fact she said I don't want to listen to it...My friends, I could talk to them, but it was still a real hard time.

When their own families have been disappointing, coworkers, friends, and community members or organizations can fill some of the gaps. Jean describes this important role: "My best friend has been so supportive. I mean she really – its been great. She really considers Bobby part of the family so that's been good. When I adopted I got support from my colleagues. And the neighbors are supportive."

Like Jean, many parents reflected on the importance of having a supportive neighborhood or living in a diverse community. Beth does not ever recall feeling uncomfortable or unwelcome when in public with her two adopted children of color. She explains that "everyone was very supportive of us. That's never been a problem. But we live in [a diverse community]... I mean I would like to live in the country but I'm not going to move her to the country 'cause then it would be more of an issue." Similarly, Barbara explained of her neighborhood:

We have a lovely neighborhood here that – we have — let's see, right now two – three Asian – four Asian families and there's not an African American family right in this little cul-de-sac but the next house over is. So... Close by. Yeah, so it's a nice mix. That's important and everybody's – we always have these potlucks...It was Dante's idea, actually. Our first potluck, yeah...He was a little kid and he said something about "Let's have a potluck for our neighborhood." And we did and we've been doing it ever since.

In all, the families in this study, while they are alternative in the sense of being a transracial adoptive family, have many of the same kinds of needs and hopes for support that all families have. They want to feel like they belong and are welcome in their extended families, their neighborhoods, schools, and communities. And when problems or difficulties arise, they want to be able to access developmentally and

culturally appropriate services for themselves and their children. Being a transracial adoptive family certainly adds to the complexity of ties to family and community but it doesn't seem to change the basic requirements for support.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter provides in-depth information on some of the many experiences and challenges of contemporary transracial adoptive families in California. The inclusion of parents' and children's voices bring the issues to life further. Although there are numerous possible areas for discussion, this chapter focused on those most salient to transracial adoptive families: background for adoption, children's understanding of their adoption, openness and contact, race and the transracial adoptive family, and services and supports. The goal of the chapter, and ultimately the curriculum, is to improve the quality of services and support provided to these unique families. As more children of color, many of whom are older and have multiple special needs, are permanently placed with White parents, it is vital to understand these families' normative needs. The first step toward that goal is gaining a clear understanding of the ways in which transracial adoptive families are similar to and different from other adoptive and non-adoptive families. This section summarizes the study findings, and provides a discussion of the implications.

Chapter Summary

Background for Adoption

Parents had many reasons for adopting, and it differed to some extent by what type of adoption they sought. The private agency and independent adoptions were completed by a couple that was married at the time of placement. For most of them

adoption was a choice that was pursued only after a lengthy process of attempting to become pregnant. In contrast, those who pursued a public agency adoption were all single at the time of the adoption placement, and the decision to adopt was a conscious choice to create a family in that way or to adopt a child with whom they already had a relationship. For more than one parent, the realization that adopting an older child rather than an infant would be a better fit for their lifestyle influenced the decision to adopt a child in foster care. Once couples or individuals made the decision to adopt, they identified different characteristics that were important to them. For some, what initially seemed important changed over time, but in all situations adoptive parents spent time considering their priorities. Those who adopted through private agencies were generally more interested in parenting a newborn child with few or no developmental difficulties, while those adopting children from foster care were more open to simply finding a child that seemed like a good fit for them.

Children's Understanding of Their Adoption.

The 18 children in this sample vary in age from 6 to 20, and therefore, because of developmental level alone, have very different views on what adoption means for them and their families. It is clear that the children adopted at birth have a different perspective than those who remember living with their birth mother or foster parents prior to adoption, and that voluntary relinquishment allows for a different understanding than involuntary removal. Other factors that play an important role in children's understanding are the amount and kind of contact that takes place between the adoptive and birth families, and the functioning level of birth parents or other family members. Given the small number of children we spoke with, and the variety of

experiences they had, it was difficult to draw specific overall conclusions about their experiences.

Openness and Contact

The families in this study maintain different levels of openness and contact with their child's birth family, and with varying members of their children's natal families, from birth mothers to cousins. Adoptive families' desire to maintain contact—or attempts to maintain contact—brought many issues to the forefront of family life. But overall, we did not hear truly consistent differences between the experiences of those who adopted from the public child welfare system and those who adopted through a private agency or independently. The reasons that adoptive families chose or desired contact for themselves and their children fell into several areas – the ability to discuss issues of race and culture more easily, providing role models of the same racial background as their child, providing children with information about their heritage or medical background, and offering realistic images of birth relatives. For a variety of reasons, some parents have been unable to maintain the kind and level of contact that they wanted or imagined. And although many parents desire contact, the ability to implement and maintain it presents periods or moments of vulnerability. Openness and contact are not automatic, but instead tend to change and evolve over time. In some cases, even those with whom the family keeps in touch changes. Nonetheless, no family who sought out contact voiced regret for doing so.

Race and the Transracial Adoptive Family

The families in this study manage the changing complexities of being an adoptive family, as well as those issues related to having different racial backgrounds. For many

of the families, other factors, such as children being adopted at an older age or having special needs as a result of abuse or neglect adds another set of issues. Having a different racial and biological heritage from one another sparked discussions about similarities and differences, as well as wishes and disappointments. Many talked about finding ways to discuss their child's ancestry with them, while at the same time reminding them that they are part of the adoptive parent's family history. Some parents explained that they bring up questions of race more than their children do. In addition to discussions about racial heritage or background, many adoptive parents described their efforts to learn about traditions and celebrations historically associated with their child's culture, and to incorporate them into family life.

Children of color who have White parents sometimes develop a fluidity with which they move between two cultural worlds. Many parents described the ways they have observed their children doing so. As children get older, issues of identity become more prominent in general. Being a child of color with White parents adds additional layers of complexity to the process of identity formation. Schools are a significant place for children's socialization, both in terms of the amount of time spent there and the relationships formed. Adoptive parents were aware that their children's experiences at school had far-reaching effects, and that as parents of children of color their choices for schools were very meaningful. Many parents felt that they had to choose between schools with better learning opportunities but little diversity, and those with more racial and cultural diversity but less strong academics. In addition to what families feel that they get (or do not get) from their children's schools, many adoptive parents described

the importance of specifically providing their children with mentors and role models who could help them build a positive racial identity, as well as other activities and programs.

Parents also have a developmental process related to understanding and dealing with racial issues and realities. Some parents described the ways that raising a child of color made them more outspoken against racism or injustice. Although the parents often described their increased awareness of racism, most described their increased consciousness as a benefit. Some even described a transformation in how they view themselves racially, and the ways they have newly prioritized diversity in their lives.

Services and Supports

Prior to adopting their children, all of the parents in this study sought out and received services and supports in terms of emotional and informational needs. Some services met both preparation needs simultaneously, while others were more specific. Most commonly, parents reported doing research on adoption, attending support groups, attending workshops and seminars, and doing counseling. The decision to have openness, with little information ahead of time about how families negotiate the experience, was voiced as a missing piece for a number of people. In some cases, parents reflected back to supports they wish they had gotten, and some parents voiced disappointment with the system and institutional structure as a whole.

In most cases, preparing for the placement of a newborn, compared to an older child, was a different process. Rather than anticipating the arrival of a newborn, parents who adopted children from the public child welfare system imagined the arrival of an older child, often with multiple special needs. In most cases, their child had already experienced life in a number of different homes with different caregivers, and preparing

for adoption meant quickly getting up to speed with the background of the situation as well as current issues and struggles.

Parents' reasons for adopting, and adoptive families' needs vary significantly. There is not one particular answer about what services and supports would satisfy or best help all families. Rather, the participants in this study help to highlight the fact that a broad base of assistance and support is needed that can be tailored to individual needs. These services generally fall under the headings of emotional support, informational support, and concrete aid, but there is often overlap between categories. Additionally, over time families' needs change and evolve. The formal role of the adoption agency generally ends, community agencies can become active players, and informal supports from family and friends become vital for many families. In all, the families in this study, while they are alternative in the sense of being a transracial adoptive family, have many of the same kinds of needs and hopes for support that all families have.

Discussion and Implications

Based on the findings from this study, a number of issues stand out that have relevance for social workers interacting with transracial adoptive families. One of the most important points to consider is that the development and functioning of the family as a whole is as significant as that of the individual members. For those transracial adoptive families maintaining contact with birth family members it is essential to consider the triad, or larger family network, as a whole. Each member develops within the context of the family unit, and therefore, examining or intervening with individuals without also considering the needs and issues of the whole may fall short.

The second point is that the salience of particular issues varies and changes over time for individuals and families. Depending on the adoptive family background and current situation, some of this change is predictable. But there is also variability for all families. For example, the issue of identity development is universal, but the timing and significance are influenced by many different factors. A child who experienced abuse or neglect, or has behavioral, emotional, or cognitive issues may progress through an identity development stage differently or on a different timeline than typical adolescents and young adults. Similarly, it was clear that the issue of race was significant in some families' daily lives from the time the child was young until the present time, while in other cases there were so many other issues to contend with that race did not factor into daily living in the same ways. The same is true for issues that develop around openness and contact, and the need for services and support.

Roles of Social Workers Working With Transracial Adoptive Families

- Understanding the kinds of issues that are likely to arise for transracial adoptive families based on training, an understanding of the literature, and other families' experiences.
- Preparing potential adoptive parents for the realities of parenting across racial lines – both the rewards and the challenges.
- Helping transracial adoptive families connect to a variety of community resources, including other families like their own.
- Educating transracial adoptive families about some of the potential issues that may arise in the future, especially around race and adoption, and to suggest ways to get support.
- Listening to the stories and the experiences of each family without making assumptions about the path they will necessarily follow.
- Keeping an open mind.
- Providing long-term connections to County agencies for those families who have a child with developmental, behavioral, or emotional issues – recognizing that

they may need a different level of services and support than other families, and for a much longer time period.

- Trusting transracial adoptive parents – they know their children more intimately than anyone else does.
- Considering that even if race is not the most salient issue for a family at a particular time, it always matters.
- Remembering that adoption at an older age, following multiple foster placements, creates a very different life course for many adoptees than newborn adoption.
- Providing as much information and support as possible for adoptive parents to decide about maintaining contact with a child's birth family.
- Honoring and supporting adoptive parents' decisions about openness and contact with birth family members.

Before I was adopted, I was separated from two families – my birth mother's and my birth father's. I was also separated from my culture and my race. These losses have been huge. People interpret honest talk about them to mean that I wish I weren't a part of my family. Or that I am not connected. Or maybe even that my mom and dad did something wrong by adopting me. Or that I am not grateful. But you know what, I am not 'grateful' that I had to be adopted. I don't feel 'wonderfully lucky' that I was raised in a culture different from the one I was born into. What I do feel is that I love my mom and dad very much. I do feel totally connected to them. I wouldn't trade my family for any family in the world – and still I know what I have lost.

- Liza Steinberg Triggs

(in Chapter 5, Trainer's Guide for Transracial Adoption)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Background for Adoption

1. How do you think adoptive parents' different reasons for adopting might affect how they approach their parenting? How might these reasons specifically relate to transracially adopting families?
2. In the stories presented from the interviews, adoptive parents who pursued adoption through public agencies were all single. Why do you think private adoptions seem to be dominated by married couples while public adoptions are predominated by single parents or nontraditional families? How might these issues be addressed?

3. Many parents indicated that as they began looking for an infant to adopt, race was insignificant. However, several noted that other disabilities or special needs were barriers to adoption placement. As a social worker, would you find this a point of concern in assessing potentially adoptive parents for placement? Are there any situations in which an applicant's preferences for adoption would concern you?
4. Under current child welfare laws, what are adoption workers allowed to ask parents in terms of assessing suitability for adopting particular children?

Children's Understanding of Their Adoption

1. Consider the children's descriptions of being adopted. Do their accounts match what you would expect transracially adopted children to say? Are there things that are not said that you would expect to hear?
2. Several adopted children explained that they tired of telling others that they were adopted and what that meant. Do you think it is appropriate for people to ask adopted children about their background? How might race increase or alter the kinds of questions that are asked? How would you advise a child to answer such questions? What could you tell adoptive parents early on to prepare them for the questions their children may encounter?
3. How do you think being adopted by a parent of a different race affects children's understanding of adoption?
4. How does children's age at the time of adoption placement affect or influence their understanding or feelings about adoption?

Openness and Contact

1. Adoptive parents are increasingly attempting to maintain openness and contact. Many identified openness as providing benefits to them and their children, although it simultaneously creates a source of vulnerability to the adoptive parents and children. What are your personal views about openness and contact? Would you yourself--if you adopted a child--be willing to have on-going contact with your child's birth family? Does your answer change depending on whether it is the birth parents or extended relatives? Does the age at which your child was adopted change your view?
2. How do the conditions of placement (voluntary vs. involuntary termination of parental rights) and the kind of adoption (private, public, or independent) affect families' abilities to maintain openness and contact? How do you imagine these issues shape adoptive parents' willingness to have contact? Would these dynamics change over time?

3. Several parents commented that their commitment to maintaining openness and contact with their children's birth families was in part motivated by a concern about their children's racial identity. Does this seem to you to be a valid reason to have contact? Do you see any potential limitations in maintaining contact for this reason?
4. Many adoptive parents described the challenges they face in trying to maintain boundaries with their children's birth families. Can you think of any strategies that might help both birth and adoptive parents do so early on? How do you think on-going challenges should be mediated? Should service providers, including social workers, do more?
5. Efforts to maintain contact were also sometimes met with disapproval from adoptive parents' own families. Are there ways you can imagine these intrafamilial issues can be addressed? How would you counsel adoptive families considering openness to broach the issue with their own families?

Race and the Transracial Adoptive Family

1. Consider adoptive parents' efforts to help their children identify with multiple family histories (those of the adoptive parents and that of their natal family). Do you think this is the most reasonable approach? Are there points of concern for you? How do you envision the ideal approach to this issue?
2. How do you make sense of the adopted children's ability to move between different cultural worlds--sometimes "speaking ghetto" and other times "proper English"? Does this communicate multicultural competence or a lack of a clear identity?
3. How do you think children of color who are adopted by White parents should racially identify themselves?
4. As adoptive children got older, many become increasingly aware of the racial difference between them and their parents. Some were even embarrassed to go out in public with their parents. What is your impression of this? Is this age appropriate? Can you identify ways that these issues can be addressed before they arise?
5. What do you think are the qualifications to raise a child of color? How should those characteristics be assessed and by whom? Should someone lacking these things be barred from becoming a transracially adoptive parent?

Services and Support

1. What type of pre-adoption services or research do you think is necessary for potential adoptive parents to do? What might happen in families that do not do this?
2. What differences are there in service needs depending on the age of the child being adopted? The race of the child? The kind of adoption? How might you approach cases differently depending on these things?
3. This section discussed both the emotional and psychological services families used, as well as the sources of material support. Think through the different stories and identify which services families received and which services families may not have received that you think would have been appropriate.
4. How would you counsel adoptive families whose own families are unsupportive? What services or resources would you offer?

CHAPTER IV

CASE VIGNETTES

CHAPTER IV CASE VIGNETTES

INSTRUCTIONAL GUIDE

Six vignettes were created from interviews with study participants. Direct identifying information has been changed, and certain elements have been omitted to safeguard confidentiality. Each of the vignettes is designed to prompt discussion of particular issues related to adoption, race, openness and contact, or services and support. Unique aspects of family stories were chosen to clearly illustrate portions of experience that are thought provoking in some way. Accompanying each vignette is a set of case-specific questions for discussion.

Instructors are encouraged to use this chapter in a range of ways to suit their needs. It may be suitable for assigned reading, as a writing exercise, as part of an exam, or for use in the context of the classroom or group discussions.

This chapter can be used to foster the following competencies for public child welfare work:

- Ethnic Sensitive and Multicultural Practice - 1.1, 1.2, 1.4
- Core Child Welfare Practice - 2.5, 2.12, 2.14, 2.15
- Human Behavior and the Social Environment - 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5
- Workplace Management - 4.1
- Culturally Competent Child Welfare Practice - 5.4
- Advanced Child Welfare Practice - 6.6
- Human Behavior and the Child Welfare Environment - 7.6
- Child Welfare Policy, Planning, and Administration – 8.9.

VIGNETTE #1

Andy, Jane, and their three children, Nick, Joshua, and Michelle, live in a medium-size city south of a large metropolitan area. Their home is located in a quiet neighborhood close to the public elementary school and shopping. Andy is an accountant and Jane is a teacher, affording them a comfortable middle-class lifestyle. Andy and Jane are both Jewish and White, and have been married for 20 years. Although they desired a family early in their relationship, after 5 years they were unable to conceive a child. After grieving the initial loss, they spent time researching different adoption opportunities. Together they decided to adopt independently rather than through an agency, and to seek a newborn of any race. Over time, they created a family by adopting Nick (White, 14 years old), Joshua (Latino/White, 10 years old), and Michelle (Black/White, 8 years old). All three children were adopted at birth. The family is active in the Jewish community and has connections with other interracial families.

At the time of Joshua's adoption, Jane and Andy expressed a strong desire to remain in contact with his birth mother. They adopted Nick 4 years earlier and maintain a distant but positive relationship with his birth family. In fact, Nick's birth mother lived with Jane and Andy for a few weeks before the birth of the baby and Nick is also in contact with several younger birth siblings. However, Joshua's birth mother, 21 years old at the time of the pregnancy, was engaged to a different man than the one who she had become pregnant with. Her fiancé wanted nothing to do with the child and pressured her not to have contact with Jane and Andy. "...He wouldn't let her have any contact with us. She wanted contact with us. I got one phone call with her...." A few years later, she got divorced and called them. Despite numerous positive visits and experiences over a period of about 5 years she rather suddenly moved to a different state a couple of years ago and ended contact. The family also has very little information and no photos of Joshua's birth father.

Discussion Questions:

1. At this point in his life Joshua says about adoption: "Um – it's not like the biggest deal in the world 'cause lots of people are adopted and – it doesn't mean they're different at all. It's a different kind of family but it doesn't mean they're like a different kind of person."

What stage of adoption understanding and awareness is Joshua currently at?
What factors or characteristics do you imagine influence his understanding?

2. At 10 years of age, what do you imagine Joshua's experience is of his birth mother, who for a number of years was peripherally involved with the family and then rather suddenly ended contact?

3. How do you prepare adoptive families for the possibility that they and their child may become attached to biological family members only to find that the biological family members reduce or end contact at some point?
4. Joshua, who is mixed-race Latino and White, is said to closely resemble his biological father, who is Latino, but has never had contact with him or seen any photos. What implications might this have for Joshua's sense of himself and for his coming adolescence?
5. What advice can you offer to families to help prepare them for the possibility that one child will be able to maintain contact with biological family members while another sibling cannot? What implication does this have for the adoptive family system?

VIGNETTE #2

Alicia, a White woman in her mid-50s, is a single mother to 12-year-old Maria, who is Latina. They live in an affluent small town in Northern California. Alicia is the vice president of a marketing firm in a nearby city and Maria attends a small private school that is nearly all White in population. Earlier in her life, Alicia was married but she and her husband decided not to have children together. Several years after divorcing, Alicia began to consider the possibility of adopting a child. A number of people she knew had gone to China to adopt but she knew that there were many children in her own community that needed homes, and as a single woman with a professional career she didn't think she would have the time and energy for an infant. She was open to adopting a child of any race but was particularly interested in a Latino child because she had spent significant time in Central and South America, and is fluent in Spanish.

Maria, one of six children, was the first child born to her 15-year-old birth mother, Stacy. Her birth father was never involved in her care. Stacy became heavily involved with drugs and was seriously neglectful to Maria and her siblings. As a 3-year-old, Maria was left alone for days at a time to care for her younger brothers. She was removed from the home following a sexual abuse incident. Over the next 3 years, she had seven different foster placements due in part to multiple attempts at reunification. Her foster-adopt placement with Alicia was her eighth placement.

At the time of the adoption finalization, Alicia was given complete control over the issue of whether or not to maintain any kind of contact with Stacy. Despite the fact that four of the six children have been permanently removed and the home continues to be dysfunctional, Alicia decided that it was in the best interests of Maria to continue a distant relationship. Alicia follows Maria's lead when it comes to initiating contact by phone or in person, and until recently there have been about three or four contacts a year. Stacy has recently begun pressuring Maria for more involvement.

Alicia reports that Maria has been in therapy for a number of years but that issues around adoption are "constantly" present. In contrast, while discussions about race and ethnicity occur, Alicia feels that they are completely overshadowed by those of adoption, at least for now. Alicia feels that issues of class figure most prominently after adoption because of the disparity between their lives and the lives of Maria's birth family.

Discussion Questions:

1. How well do you feel that Alicia was prepared to address the issues and needs of a Latino child? Under MEPA, what aspects of this could be explored by her caseworker?

2. Given Maria's early childhood background what specific kinds of services and supports do you think would most help her? Is it appropriate to continue providing services to her and her family following adoption finalization?
3. What are the potential benefits and drawbacks of maintaining a relationship with Maria's birth mother despite the history of abuse and neglect? How do you imagine the relationship affects Alicia and Maria's daily lives? What kind of support or information would you offer to Alicia about negotiating this relationship?
4. Is it possible for issues of race and adoption to be distinct or separate as a transracial adoptee? How do you imagine that the town they live in and the school Maria attends will affect Maria's racial identity development as she matures? How does the issue of class figure in?

VIGNETTE #3

John and Linda, both in their early 50s, are White parents of two mixed-race transracially adopted girls. Ruby, age 13, is Black, Native American, and White, and her sister Deena, age 12, is Black and White. Ruby and Deena were both placed for adoption at birth through private adoption agencies. Both of the birth mothers were young, poor, and in unstable living arrangements at the time of adoption placement. The family moved from urban Detroit to a small community in Northern California about 7 years ago because of John's job. John and Linda have both been activists for their entire adult lives and until moving to their current town always lived in multiracial neighborhoods. When they learned of their fertility problems they made a shift toward adoption and were open to children of any race. "I felt competent enough to do it, and I have a lot of friends...who supported me in that, Black friends." They did however feel strongly about not adopting through the child welfare system in Detroit because they felt that it was corrupt.

John and Linda are very conscious of race issues and have worked to make changes in the schools their children have attended and the neighborhood they live in. Linda worked as a volunteer to help recruit more families of color to the private school and provided feedback about the curriculum to her daughters' teachers. She and John parent their children in a way they believe is aligned with cultural traditions of Black families. "Well, you know, Black families really believe – are pretty strict about things in certain ways." They feel it is important to prepare them to live in society as Black people.

Although both Ruby and Deena are of mixed-race background, they identify as Black. However, Linda wishes that they would become more focused on their Black racial identity – "I can't wait for them to become more Afrocentric." Most recently, both girls have reportedly been much more focused on issues related to gender than to those of adoption or race. "I just think that the girl thing is really probably bubbling more on the surface...."

Discussion Questions

1. Given the negative attention many county child welfare departments around the country have received over the last few years, what can be done to improve the chances that couples like John and Linda will consider adopting through public agencies?
2. Neither of the girls experienced abuse or neglect prior to adoption, and each was adopted at birth. How do you imagine that issues around adoption, race, and other aspects of identity are filtered through this lens, compared to some of the children adopted from the public child welfare system?

3. Under the requirements of MEPA, what can you learn about potential parents' interest in and ability to address the racial issues of kids? Does this matter, and if so, in what ways?
4. What benefits or freedoms do Ruby and Deena receive from the kind of race-conscious parenting their parents use?
5. In what ways is it appropriate, or not, that the girls are being raised as Black although they are both mixed race? What issues do you imagine will arise for them during adolescence and young adulthood?

VIGNETTE #4

Abby and Kelly are a White lesbian couple raising their 11-year-old daughter Tyra, who is Black. The family lives in a working-class urban area in Northern California. Abby is a social services professional and Kelly is a nurse. Abby was single at the time she adopted Tyra 6 years ago and became involved with Kelly a couple of years later. From the time she was a teenager she thought she might adopt a child, and partly as a result of having been raised in a liberal multiracial household, she imagined that the child might be Black.

Tyra is a tall, articulate, bright child who attends fifth grade at a private school. She was placed with Abby when she was 5 years old, after having already lived with seven different caregivers. During one placement, at the age of 4, she reportedly said, “well I think I’m gonna be moving on soon....I think I’ve been with Donna long enough.” Tyra experienced severe neglect from a young age and before being placed in the foster care system had already been shuffled between several different family members. She had severe, significant tantrums from an early age, which contributed to her being moved a lot. Numerous reunification attempts were made so that Tyra thought that she would be living with her mother again only to be moved to a different foster home. Since the time of adoption finalization there has been very little contact between Tyra and her birth mother.

Over the last 6 years Abby, and then Abby and Kelly together, have struggled to help Tyra manage anger and tendencies toward aggressive and violent behavior. She has been diagnosed with an attachment disorder, anxiety disorder, and depressive disorder, takes a number of medications to help regulate her emotional states, is in therapy, and lives in a household with lots of structure. Abby was told, “she’s like basically seething with anger because she number one cannot afford to let her guard down, and two you’re making it so hard for her to remember that she has to protect herself against you.” Over the years Abby and Kelly have had to call the police multiple times to help bring Tyra under control, and they have been yelled at, had things thrown at them, been punched, bitten, and had their hair pulled. She has also been violent with herself on many occasions.

Although Abby and Kelly have received some assistance from the County, Abby feels that once the adoption is finalized the system wants little more to do with the family. “And the system goes, ‘whoa, at least that’s one out of the way. We’ve got 4,000 more.’ And so there’s no real attempt to say – to take a real systems view of it, to say obviously it’s preferable for this child to be in family-based care. What do we have to do to make that work?”

Discussion Questions

1. What role should the public child welfare system play with a family like this before and after the adoption is finalized? What responsibility does the system have to help this family succeed?
2. What kinds of supports, both formal and informal, do you think would help this family during the transitions related to adolescence and young adulthood?
3. Where and how do you imagine that the issue of race factor into this family? Abby reports that issues related to race are present, as evidenced by the example of Tyra dropping Abby's hand in public when a Black person approached.
4. Tyra has had very limited contact with her birth mother since adoption. What are the implications of having contact, or not?

VIGNETTE #5

Beth is a single White mother of two Black adopted biological siblings, Jamal, age 20 and Ananda, age 17. They live in a large multiracial urban area in California; Jamal lives with his girlfriend while Ananda lives at home with Beth. Beth was single when she decided to pursue the idea of creating a family through adoption, and she has remained single over the years of raising her children.

Jamal and Ananda are two of four siblings, and were removed from their birth mother's care because of her drug use and neglect. Two of the other siblings were subsequently removed, one after she attempted to trade him for drugs on the street. Their birth mother is currently in prison serving a drug-related sentence. Jamal and Ananda were ages 7 and 4 at the time of their placement with Beth but had already been living in foster care for about 3 years. They currently have no contact with their birth mother though she has found and contacted them in the past, once leaving a phone message saying, "I'm calling to talk – I'm their real mom. I'm calling to say hello to Ananda and Jamal and to have them please call me and let me know and – 'cause I feel lost without them." Beth feels a need to protect them from phone or in-person contact but has accepted occasional letters over the years.

Prior to the adoption placement Beth received a number of supportive services from the County, including parenting skills training, support classes, information, and case workers to talk with. After placement, she and the children continued to receive support. Over the years the County has helped in other ways, such as financially assisting with tuition for a private alternative school for Ananda when she was failing in the regular school setting and helping to arrange for a residential drug treatment program.

Despite the support Beth has received from the County, during transitions or difficult times the children have struggled in many ways. Ananda in particular has failed in school and dropped out, began stealing and taking drugs, has verbally and physically threatened Beth, and ran away from home. Most recently, she threatened to kill Beth, destroyed a number of household items, ran away and then spent 4 months in a group home placement.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you think that there could have been a way to prevent the kind of self-destructive behavior expressed by Ananda? What factors do you think contributed to her current status?
2. Does the County have a responsibility to provide particular services to this family? If so, what, how much, and for how long? If not, why?

3. How should the issue of contact with Jamal and Ananda's birth mother be handled? Is it in their best interests to have a relationship with her?
4. Ananda reportedly went through a stage in elementary school and junior high where she insisted to people outside the family that she was born to her adopted mom, and that her father was a Black man who divorced and left them. How does the issue of race factor into this family constellation? What about adoption? Can the two be separated?

VIGNETTE #6

Jean is the 45-year-old White single mother of a 14-year-old Black boy named Bobby. They live in a diverse urban area in a large Southern California city. Jean works for a Regional Center providing child and family services to developmentally delayed or drug-exposed infants and toddlers.

Jean first met Bobby when he was 21 months old and living in a group home. She was contracted by the County to provide him with Regional Center services. Bobby was removed from his mother at birth because of exposure to drugs. He had a number of serious health-related issues at the time and was placed in a home designated for children deemed medically fragile. His original placement failed after less than a year. This placement failed after a few months, reportedly due to circumstances not related to Bobby. He was then placed in a group home, temporarily, while waiting for a suitable foster family placement. He ended up living in the group home for 7 months. By this time, Bobby was said to have developmental delays and behavior issues in addition to medical concerns. Jean reports that there was a White employee at the group home who was interested in adopting him but was discouraged because of her race.

Jean continued to follow Bobby after his group home placement. When he turned 3 years old he was no longer eligible for Regional Center services so Jean came to see him on her own time. She helped to get a CASA worker assigned to his case. At one court hearing, when he was 4 years old, Jean reports that Bobby was said to be “not adoptable” by the social worker, and plans were being made to find him a long-term foster placement.

At that point, Jean began lobbying to have Bobby placed with her. She felt that he had no other chance for a permanent family and was very attached to him. She said that she had to fight to be considered because she is White and single, and the worker thought it would be inappropriate. Prior to her adoption of Bobby, a Black neighbor confronted Jean. “Was that a Black child I saw with you? And I said yes, I’m his foster mother, and she went off, why is he with a White woman...And I says, nobody wanted him, I mean, literally nobody wanted him. I sent pictures of him to people, I work with a lot of Black teachers, I says, even people at your churches, nobody, not one person.”

Discussion Questions

1. Did MEPA and the Interethnic Adoption Provisions apply to this case?
2. Under MEPA, how, if it all would this case have been handled differently?
3. What could have been done differently to ensure that Bobby would have fewer overall placements? How would you tease out the effects of his placement experience from the multiple other issues present for him?

4. What kinds of services and supports would Jean and Bobby most likely need following placement and adoption finalization? What do you imagine his long-term needs are?

CHAPTER V

PRACTICE GUIDANCE ON TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION

CHAPTER V PRACTICE GUIDANCE ON TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION

INSTRUCTIONAL GUIDE

This chapter consists of 50 handouts (which are located in a separate document where you found this curriculum) on issues relevant to transracial adoptive families. With the exception of one, each handout is an attractive one-page sheet containing clear and concise information on one particular topic as well as artwork or photographs. Examples of topics from the Table of Contents include *Transracially Adopted Child's Bill of Rights*, *The Value of Family Rituals*, *Voices From the Field*, *Open Transracial Adoptions*, and *Hair Is an Adoption Issue*.

These handouts can be used in a variety of ways: to supplement or enrich training or teaching, as a handout packet, or with potential or current transracial adoptive families. Each handout is designed to stand alone or to be used in conjunction with others.

Handouts for Training Curriculum was written and created by Gail Steinberg and Beth Hall, Co-Directors of Pact, An Adoption Alliance. Additional sets of the handouts can be obtained from them. Please contact them for pricing information.

This chapter can be used to foster the following competencies for public child welfare work:

- Ethnic Sensitive and Multicultural Practice - 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4
- Core Child Welfare Practice - 2.5, 2.12, 2.14
- Human Behavior and the Social Environment - 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5
- Workplace Management - 4.1, 4.3, 4.4, 4.5
- Advanced Child Welfare Practice – 6.3, 6.6

- Human Behavior and the Child Welfare Environment – 7.6
- Child Welfare Policy, Planning, and Administration – 8.9.

CHAPTER VI

**SELF-ASSESSMENT GUIDE FOR
CONSIDERING TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION**

CHAPTER VI SELF-ASSESSMENT GUIDE FOR CONSIDERING TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION

INSTRUCTIONAL GUIDE

This chapter is a self-assessment guide for people considering transracial adoption. It is composed of the booklet *Below the Surface*, written and created by Gail Steinberg and Beth Hall, Co-Directors of Pact, An Adoption Alliance.²

The booklet consists of a series of multiple-choice questions on self-assessment topics such as Personality, Attitude, Lifestyle, and Knowledge. The scoring information offers feedback on an individual's suitability for parenting across racial lines.

This chapter/booklet can be used in a number of ways, including with potential transracial adoptive parents. It is especially suitable for training students or workers about the day-to-day complexities and issues inherent in transracial adoptive parenting. Assigning students to take the assessment at home and then to discuss responses and reactions could offer a hands-on supplement to the other materials.

"This chapter can be used to foster the following competencies for public child welfare work:

- Ethnic Sensitive and Multicultural Practice - 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4
- Core Child Welfare Practice - 2.5, 2.12, 2.14
- Human Behavior and the Social Environment - 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4
- Workplace Management - 4.1.

² The booklet can be purchased from <http://www.pactadopt.org>. The current price is \$6.50 per copy with bulk pricing available. Go to their online store from the home page and then to the link for Transracial Adoption.

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APPENDIXES

STUDY METHODS

DESIGN

This study employed qualitative research methods to collect data from transracial adoptive families in California. Face-to-face interviewing was used in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the developmental issues and challenges encountered by transracial adoptive families. This methodology allowed for the accounting of a level of complexity not possible with a survey design, which focuses more on addressing a wide range of topics and provides less rich an understanding of the topic. In addition, the project offers insights into the complexities of transracial adoptive families maintaining contact with their child's birth family.

SAMPLING

Participants for the project are families with transracial adopted youth ages 10-20. The participants were drawn from among a pool of adoptive parents participating in "Project Understanding," a national survey of approximately 1,000 transracial adoptive parents. Participants for "Project Understanding" were purposively recruited from adoption agencies and organizations such as Pact, An Adoption Alliance; California State Adoptions; Black Adoption Research and Placement Center; Adoptive Families of America; and Sierra Adoption Agency. There is an overrepresentation of participants recruited from agencies and organizations in California, as well as an overrepresentation of families with African American adoptees. They completed a detailed mailed questionnaire on topics such as adoption, race, adoption services, parenting, and family well-being.

Participants for this project were recruited from the total sample of parents participating in “Project Understanding.” Information was included at the end of each mailed questionnaire describing the proposed project and soliciting participation. Individuals wishing to take part in the project were asked to indicate so in the space provided and provide the ages and ethnicities of their transracially adopted children. They were informed that after their mailed survey was received a researcher would contact them by telephone to confirm eligibility and interest in participating. An information letter describing the project, and informed consent forms were then sent to all potential participants prior to scheduling a time convenient for the family to be interviewed in their homes by a researcher.

The criteria for inclusion in the sample for this study were that the adoptive family had at least one transracially adopted child between the ages of 10 and 20, the adoption was finalized, there was some kind of current, ongoing, or past contact maintained between the adoptive and birth families, and that families resided in either the Northern California or Southern California regions. The total sample of participants included 12 transracially adoptive families. Five involved adoptions from the public child welfare system, five were from private adoption agencies, and two were independent adoptions.

HUMAN SUBJECTS PROTECTIONS

All human subjects protocols and procedures were followed in the conducting of the study. After the initial telephone contact, parents were sent and reviewed written materials and consent forms. They were informed that participation in the project was voluntary and that they could choose to withdraw at any time, or choose not to answer

any questions. They were further informed that the information collected for the study would be kept confidential, and that all identifying information would be altered in written works resulting from the study. Parents also provided written consent for their child to participate in the project. The nature of their child's participation was explained and the list of questions was provided and discussed with them prior to the interview. In some cases parents asked that we not discuss particular topics with their child, which we honored. We also asked that adopted children sign their own assent form after receiving information prior to the interview. They were also told that they could stop participating at any time or skip questions that they didn't want to discuss.

INSTRUMENTATION

The qualitative interviews were conducted with a semistructured interview guide developed and tested by the project staff (see Appendix B). It contains a variety of thematically oriented open-ended and focused questions. Adoptive youth and their parents were interviewed separately with a different interview guide. Given the phenomenological and exploratory nature of the study, no standardized instruments were used. Rather, we used a thematic approach, and built on a number of the ideas and questions in the "Building Understanding" questionnaire. We also based the themes and questions on information from empirical and theoretical studies (see Chapters I and II). There have been no studies to date that have focused on this topic in this manner so we also relied on our own theoretical hypotheses. Although each interview covered the same general topics from the interview guide (adoption history and family background, openness and contact, adoptive family issues and development, and services and

supports), we allowed parents or youth to discuss in more depth issues that were particularly salient to their lives or experiences.

PROCEDURES/DATA COLLECTION

Parents indicated interest in participating in the project by completing a form in their “Building Understanding” questionnaire. We contacted them by phone, explained the project and what their participation would entail, and sent them information in the mail if they were interested in learning more. Upon receipt of their consent forms, we scheduled a time to interview the parent (or parents) and child. Most families were interviewed in their home but a couple of parents preferred to meet at work or at a restaurant for convenience. Prior to the beginning of the interview, information was reviewed again and any outstanding questions were addressed. All interviews were audiotaped. Each interview lasted between 1 to 4 hours depending on how much the participant wished to share. At the end of the interview, parents were given \$25 cash and children and youth were given \$25 gift cards to Target. Interviewers completed detailed notes following each interview and submitted the tapes to a professional transcriptionist for verbatim transcripts.

ANALYSIS

Data analysis for the project occurred simultaneously with and after data collection. Interviews and researcher observations were audiotaped and professionally transcribed on an on-going basis. The early transcripts were thoroughly reviewed to determine whether the semistructured interview schedule needed to be supplemented or altered in minor or substantive ways. As a result of this process, we added several probes following particular questions. The data was entered into a qualitative software

analysis program commonly used in social welfare, called Atlas.ti. An a-priori list of codes was developed based on the research questions and interview topics, and applied to the data. This coding process allowed for multiple layers of coding, and an iterative process whereby existing codes were changed and new ones emerged based on the data. The data was examined for consistent themes and responses, network relationships among ideas, and compared within and across groups. The findings write-up responds to the research questions and includes many participant quotations.

LIMITATIONS

Despite this study's overall value, the validity of the findings is limited in several respects. First, since the study used convenience sampling to gather families who volunteered to participate, the findings are not representative of the general population of transracial adoptive families. Second, a very small sample yields rich, in-depth information but also cannot be considered generalizable to all families. Third, we were interested in the issue of openness and contact and so sought out families who have or have had those experiences. The families who volunteered may be different in other respects as well, or may have different experiences with openness than those who did not volunteer. Finally, while we differentiated when possible between the experiences of those who adopted from private agencies or independently from those who adopted from the public child welfare system, we also combined the stories when discussing certain topics, which may have diluted important differences.

INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

ADOPTIVE PARENT INTERVIEW

WELCOME

Welcome, introduction to interview, answer any questions, consent for audiotaping.

Beginning/introduction

ADOPTION HISTORY/FAMILY BACKGROUND

I'd like to spend this first part of our time together talking about the adoption process, but before we begin,

Why don't you tell me a little bit about _____. What is she/he like? Can you tell me a favorite story about _____?

Does _____ know about his/her adoption?

If yes, when did she/he learn about it and what was she/he told?

What is _____'s racial or ethnic background, as far as you know?

What did your family look like *before* _____ came to live with you?

Probe for brief answers here. Household members: ages? How do you racially identify yourself? Your other children? Partner? Are you or your family members religious? Where are you from originally?

(Leave out probes if parent completed BU demographic form prior to interview)

Now, how did _____ come to be relinquished from her/his birth family?

And how did _____ come to be placed with you?

At the time of the placement, were you interested in adopting?

If yes, adoption was intent:

How did you come to adopt through a public adoption agency as opposed to another way?

What other kinds of characteristics or issues mattered to you when you were seeking to adopt?

Probe for characteristics such as age, race or ethnicity, special needs, sibling group, etc.

Did those issues change over time/throughout the process?

If not covered above, Why did you choose a transracial/inracial adoption?

Are you satisfied with how the adoption process went?

OPENNESS AND CONTACT

One of the issues we're interested in is the contact that sometimes takes place between adoptive and birth families. I'd like to ask you some questions about the nature of the contact your family has with _____'s birth family, and the influence the contact has had.

To begin, what is the overall arrangement that you currently have with _____'s birth family?

Probe for kind, amount, frequency of contact. Who is involved?

How was this arrangement originally worked out? (by courts, over time, in exit orders)

How has the arrangement changed over time?

How do you facilitate contact, in terms of who calls or works out transportation or logistics or contact?

Has this changed over time?

How is this current arrangement going?

How would you describe your relationship with _____'s birth family?

What kind of role does your relationship with _____'s birth family play in your family's life? In your life? How do they act toward other family members?

What kind of impact do you think that the contact has had on you personally? On _____? On _____'s birth family? How do you imagine things would be different for each of you if you had no relationship with _____'s birth family?

In what ways has the relationship been positive for _____, you and your family?

What kinds of challenges has the relationship caused? Are these things you imagined or not?

If you had it to do over again, would you still choose an open adoption?

What kinds of issues have come up around race, ethnicity, and/or culture?

Do you know how _____'s birth family feels about your child being adopted?

Has this changed over time? How do you feel about it? Does having an open adoption influence it?

For transracial adoptive families: What is it like for your family to have a different culture than your child's birth family? What impact does this have on your child? How do you think your child's birth family feels about your family being of a different race and having a different culture?

ADOPTIVE FAMILY ISSUES AND DEVELOPMENT

Another area that we're interested in is the issues that families like yours face during the years that children grow up. I'd like to ask you some questions to shed light on this.

Have you faced any specific issues or challenges around adoption in general?

For example, how have teachers, childcare providers, or friends approached the issue of adoption?

What are the most significant issues around adoption that your family is currently dealing with?

Are different family members dealing differently with it?

Does the relationship with _____'s birth family have a role in these issues?

When do these issues about adoption come up? How are they expressed and/or discussed?

How has _____'s understanding of adoption changed over time? What do you think has influenced the changes? (*Developmental periods, discussions, connection with birth family*)

Has your family confronted any specific issues or challenges around race and culture?

Do you talk to _____ about race and ethnicity? If so, how?

Have you, your spouse/partner, or other children had any negative experiences because of race?

How does race come up in your family?

When do these issues about race or culture come up? How are they expressed and/or discussed?

How would you describe your family's racial identity? *(May have been covered above)*

What are some of your family's strengths?

SERVICES AND SUPPORTS

Finally, in order to help child welfare workers provide services that families like yours need, we want to understand what kinds of services or supports you've used or needed now and in the past.

When you began the adoption process, how did you go about preparing yourself for adopting?

Prior to _____'s adoption, what kinds of services or supports were available to you?

For example... clinical services such as..., educational services, referral services, legal services, concrete services...

Were there some that you needed but didn't receive (please explain)? Were there some that you received outside the child welfare agency?

How helpful were the services or supports that you received or arranged to get?

Were there one or two services or supports you received that made the biggest difference in terms of your preparation, the transition to adoption, or anything else—not necessarily from a social services agency? *(This can include help from friends, support networks, books, etc.)*

Overall, how prepared did you feel at the time of placement to parent _____?

Were there things you wish you had been told or known at the time of _____'s placement with you?

Following _____'s adoption have you continued to receive any services or supports?

If no, have any been offered?

If yes, what are they, and in what ways are they helpful or not?

Since _____'s adoption was finalized, have you maintained any kind of contact with the child welfare agency or staff you were involved with?

How have the services and supports your family received (or still receives) affected _____?

How have they affected you? Other family members?

How have the services your family received affected how _____ deals with being adopted? With being transracially adopted? With having contact with her/his birth family?

How would you say that the services and supports affect the relationship between your family and _____'s birth family?

CLOSING

Knowing what you do now, what advice would you give to families who are interested in adoption, or are about to adopt, or are currently in the adoption process?

What would you recommend for birth families?

Is there anything else you would like to share or discuss that we haven't?

How has this interview been for you?

Is there anything you would suggest changing or adding?

ADOPTEE INTERVIEW

Welcome, introduction to interview, answer any questions, consent for audiotaping.

BEGINNING/INTRODUCTION

Let's begin by having you tell me who is in your family – everyone you consider to be.

Probe to learn how he/she refers to adoptive and birth parents. If they aren't spontaneously included in description of family, ask about them.

How has it changed over time? (*Marriage, divorce, birth, death, etc.*)

Now, when did you first find out that you were adopted? What was that like?

Probe for who told and how.

As much as you feel you want to share, why were you adopted by _____?

How has your understanding of your adoption changed as you have gotten older?

What does being adopted mean to you now?

OPENNESS AND CONTACT

One of the things that we want to learn from you and your family is about the relationship you have with your birth family. I'd like to ask you some questions about the contact you have with them, and what it has been like for you and your family.

To begin, can you tell me about the contact that you have with _____ (*and others in birth family if applicable*)? How often do you talk with or see them, and what kinds of things do you do together?

Determine the level of contact and use during the rest of this part – for example if contact consists only of talking on the telephone, then instead of asking 'who decides what kind of contact,' ask 'who decides when and how often you'll talk to each other.'

Who usually works out the plan for you and _____ to see or talk with one another?

What was the plan like before you were adopted? How has it changed?

Who decides what kind of contact you'll have, and how often it will be?

What is your relationship with _____ (birth family member) like?

What kind of role does she/he play in your life?

Leave open-ended but then probe for parental role, friend, acquaintance, etc.

In what ways do you enjoy the relationship? In what ways is it challenging or difficult?

How do you imagine things would be different in your life if you didn't know or have any contact with _____?

Are there any issues about race or ethnicity that come up when it comes to contact with your birth family, or your relationship with _____?

How does your relationship with _____ affect your parent(s) or the rest of your family?

What would you like to see happen in the future with your relationship with _____? Is this different than what you imagine will happen? If yes, how and why?

ADOPTIVE FAMILY ISSUES AND DEVELOPMENT

Another area that we're interested in learning about is some of the issues you may have faced around adoption while growing up.

Sometimes kids or teens who have been adopted feel like they have different kinds of challenges with their family, their friends, or at school than kids or teens who haven't been adopted. Have you dealt with issues or challenges that you feel are related to being adopted?

Probe for current and past experiences.

If yes, can you describe or explain? If no, why do you think that you haven't?

For those transracially adopted, are there particular issues that are related to being of a different race than your parent(s)?

SERVICES AND SUPPORTS

Finally, in order to help child welfare workers provide the services that families like yours need, we want to understand a little about the supports that you've gotten in the past, or those that you get now.

Do you remember getting support from your social worker or an organization before you were adopted? If yes, what was it and what was it like? If no, was there some support that you feel would have been helpful to you?

This could mean that the social worker spent time talking with the adoptee about her/his experience, or something more formal such as helping the adoptee get counseling.

After your adoption, did you or your family get any support in terms of counseling, groups, etc., that was helpful to you? If yes, what? If no, are there things that you can imagine that would have been helpful to you?

Do you or your family get any help or support now? From the agency or from somewhere else?

Do you still have some contact with any social workers you knew when you were going through your adoption process?

CLOSING

Knowing what you do now, what advice would you give to other kids/teens who are going through an adoption process?

Is there anything else you would like to share or discuss that we haven't?

How has this interview been for you?

Is there anything else you would suggest changing or adding?
