

TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION

Child Welfare – SW 643

Guylaine Hubbard-Brosmer

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Dr. Eileen Pasztor

1. The practice of transracial adoption, placing a child of one ethnicity with adoptive parents of a different ethnicity, has been a long-standing controversial issue within the child welfare system. The controversy exists due to divided opinions among professionals, adoptive parents, adult adoptees and other individuals as to what constitutes the best interest of the child. As an adoptive mother of two children, one biracial (African American/Caucasian) and one Caucasian, who have the same birthmother, this topic is very relevant to my personal life. In addition, my goal upon completion of this M.S.W. program is to work in the adoption field to assist in the successful formation of adoptive families, including those who choose the challenge of becoming multicultural.

2a. Transracial adoption (TRA) is only viewed as a problem by those individuals who oppose its practice (Hollingsworth, 1998). It is important to study the underlying reasons for the controversy, as well as the history of the practice in order to fully understand the need for appropriate interventions. A significant contributing factor to the controversy surrounding TRA is the point that in the training manual for social workers, *Field Guide to Child Welfare*, the placement of any minority child into foster care or adoption is considered to be a special needs situation (Rycus & Hughes, 1998, p. 885). The basis for the inclusion of minority or mixed-race children as “special needs” is that finding appropriate families for them presents a challenge. There are two primary challenges facing child welfare agencies when finding families for minority children. The first is to have enough families from the various ethnic backgrounds to accommodate the high number of children of color who need homes, such that it is not necessary to use transracial placements. The second challenge is to ensure that those families who adopt children from different cultures are adequately prepared to raise a minority child with a healthy identity and good self-esteem.

2b. The history of domestic TRA can be traced back to the end of slavery, which resulted in large numbers of homeless African American children (Neal & Stumpf, 1993). Many of these children were institutionalized in facilities run by both the African American and white communities. As child welfare services developed in the 1950's, more African American children were included due to the northern migration of African American families, fewer poor white children in the system, and an increasing national focus on integration. These events explain the early basis for the overrepresentation of African American children in the child welfare system (McRoy & Hall, 1996), a situation that remains in existence today (Frasch, Brooks, Reich & Wind, 2004). This historical path demonstrates how having a high number of minority children in foster care situations led to the need for TRA, since there were not enough minority families available for these children.

There has been growth in TRA of infants through private agencies and independent adoption practices as well. Other factors that historically contributed to this growth were the changing societal attitudes in the 1960's and a biracial baby boom around the same period of time (Root, 1996). These new attitudes were associated with a significant increase in contraceptive use, abortions and a decreased stigma coupled with single parenting. These practices led to the decreased availability of healthy, white infants for the predominantly white couples who were seeking to adopt (McRoy & Hall, 1996). Many of these couples had the preference of parenting an infant, of any ethnic origin, as opposed to the adoption of an older child.

Another way that our society has seen the growth of TRA is through the escalation of international adoption practices. Many refugee children became available in the aftermath of war (Kapstein, 2003). World War II led to the availability of orphans from Germany, Italy and

Greece, as well as Japan. The Korean and Vietnam Wars brought many refugees from Korea, Japan, China and Vietnam to U.S. families (Carter-Black, 2002). Even the end of the Cold War contributed to the availability of children for adoption from Eastern European countries, including the former Soviet Union (Kapstein, 2003; Judge, 1999). International adoption has grown steadily since the 1980's, with China and Guatemala both showing the most significant increases in the number of children adopted by U.S. families from 2001 to 2002 (Child Welfare League of America, CWLA, 2003). Most international adoptions should be considered transracial, even though many people may not view adoptions from Eastern European countries in this way, but the child is clearly being removed from their culture of origin.

Those who express opposition to TRA, usually view transracial placements (either infant or older child) as a last resort (Hollingsworth, 1999). Many researchers have documented the belief that only an African American family can ensure the development of a strong ethnic identity and self-esteem in an African American child (Hollingsworth, 1999; Bradley & Hawkins-Leon, 2002). In a comparison of cohorts of Mexican American (Latino) children adopted by either same-race or white families, it was reported that the TRA children were less likely to identify with their Latino heritage (Andujo, 1988). This study, as well as others, has indicated that despite the challenges they face, most transracial adoptees develop good self-esteem (Vroegh, 1997), psychosocial development (Simon & Roorda, 2000) and even strong racial identity (Simon & Altstein, 2002).

Adult transracial adoptees shared that their experience of growing up in a multicultural family were improved when the parents were sensitive to incorporating cultural aspects of the child's ethnic heritage into their family lives, and adequately preparing them for the racism that they invariably faced (Simon & Roorda, 2000). As a way of enabling and educating parents of

TRA, Steinberg and Hall (2000) wrote a complete guide to TRA in which it is clearly stated that transracial adoption is an issue and not a problem (p. 9). They also wrote that the challenges of TRA include the complex issues of racism, ethnic identity, personality, other's responses to a visibly multiracial family, and how developmental stages of a TRA child differ from a same-race family. There is a trend within the field of adoption to recommend that when transracial adoption is being considered, it is necessary to train the parents to enhance their cultural competence (Vonk, 2001). Another study identified resources and support services desired by the members of TRA families who were interviewed (Vidal de Haymes & Simon, 2003). Similar education and training efforts for child welfare practitioners have been proposed in order to increase their cultural competence so that they can benefit the children, families and communities they serve (McPhatter, 1997). Thus, the problem that faces child welfare practice is ensuring that TRA families have the proper training and support to raise an ethnically different child with strong ethnic identity, coping skills and good self-esteem.

2c. Comprehensive national statistics on adoption are very difficult to find. In 1993, an article on adoption statistics reported that many of the numbers available were actually estimates (Stolley, 1993). Part of the underlying reason was that no centralized national data collection system existed, and much of the reporting was voluntary. According to this report, there were 50,000 adoptions in 1944, which rose to a peak of 175,000 in 1970. In addition, it was estimated that in 1987 TRA accounted for 8% of adoptions. More recent statistics from the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse (NAIC) indicate that in 2000 and 2001, approximately 127,000 children were adopted each year (NAIC, 2004). International adoptions accounted for 15% of all adoptions. International adoption statistics are drawn from tracking records of immigrant visas issued to orphans coming to the U.S., which is collected by the Bureau of

Consumer Affairs (2004). They reported that in 2003 there were 21,616 international adoptions. A comparable statistic for domestic TRA is difficult to find, as the percentage seems to vary depending on the type of agency facilitated the placement. A survey in the early 1990's of both public and private agencies showed that about 9% of African American children were placed into TRA by public agencies and 37% of African American children were placed transracially through private agencies (Courtney, 1997). Thus, it is difficult to give definitive numbers of people who are part of a TRA family, but it is safe to acknowledge that the most direct impact is on the adoptive family and the adoptees. In addition, any person who works in the child welfare practices of adoption or foster care has the potential of being affected by the transracial placement of children.

3a. The government has made several attempts to intervene and regulate TRA, which had been prohibited in many states. In 1994, Congress passed the Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA, 1994), which was intended to prevent discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin within the child welfare system when making decisions about the placement of children. Some of the language in MEPA rendered it somewhat ineffective for the intent with which it was written (Brooks, Barth, Bussiere & Patterson, 1999). Subsequently, MEPA was modified through legislation entitled Removal of Barriers to Interethnic Adoption (Interethnic Adoption Provisions of 1996) (Hollinger, 1998). Despite these newer pieces of legislation there remains many challenges to implementing these laws. These challenges include the continued controversy, lack of clarity in the law, lack of information, unrealistic expectations, lack of control, and lack of adequate resources (Brooks, Barth, Bussiere & Patterson, 1999).

Hollingsworth (2003) gave a summary of policies involving international adoption. These include the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, which was intended

to ensure that the children of international adoption are able to maintain linkages to their culture of origin. The other one was the Hague Conference on Private International Law in 1993, which encouraged countries to attempt to keep children in their country of origin, and if these attempts failed, then to allow inter-country placement as long as the child's records were accessible and their cultural identity preserved.

The development and preservation of a child's ethnic identity is crucial to their healthy psychosocial development (Frasch & Brooks, 2003). These authors took aspects of research on identity development, ethnoracial identity development, adoption understanding, identity and adjustment, adoptive family life cycle and transracial adoption to construct a theoretical framework for the normative development of transracial adoptive families. Development of a positive racial identity is one of the areas covered in the book on TRA by Steinberg and Hall (2000). They present several guidelines for helping the child through this process, such as being consistent, offering praise or criticism, allowing choices, encouraging the child to use their abilities and making sure the child has a supportive peer group. These guidelines have applicability to more than just ethnic identity development. Thus, when racial identity issues arise, then the parent can trust the child's instincts, be an ally, model the struggle with difficult issues and ensure that the child has exposure to role models who have overcome discrimination to become successful adults.

In order for an adoptive parent to help their child with race-related issues, it is essential that they develop their own racial awareness and increase their level of cultural competence (Vonk, 2001). This author developed a conceptual definition of cultural competence for transracial adoptive parents, which includes racial awareness, multicultural planning and survival skills. This work served as the starting point for the development of an instrument to measure

cultural competence, and for establishing an operational definition. Vonk (2001) suggests that this definition can be used in training prospective adoptive parents, and can also be used post-adoption or for training practitioners in social work.

Various support and educational services are necessary to assist TRA parents in becoming culturally competent, such as those identified in the study by Vidal deHaymes and Simon (2003). Their interviews with 20 TRA families resulted in suggestions such as providing a resource list (for culturally appropriate books, toys, clothing, films, etc.), culture-specific classes, using cultural mentors, educating workers and providing a forum in which the parents can become aware of and combat their own racism. In an attempt to develop a structured means for teaching cultural competence, a curriculum was created through the California Social Work Education Center entitled “Enhancing Positive Outcomes in Transracial Adoptive Families” (Frasch, Brooks, Reich & Wind, 2004). Many of the TRA families that were interviewed had read educational material, attended support groups and participated in workshops during their pre-adoptive period. The authors were unable to generalize post-adoption services, which varied according to the type of adoption, e.g. older children have different needs and possibly behavioral problems that usually don’t exist for infant adoptions. This curriculum also promotes openness in transracial adoption, a circumstance that often occurs when the child is adopted out of foster care, but is also promoted by many agencies.

3b. Appropriate training of both adoptive parents and social workers in the field of adoption is a necessary approach for improving outcomes of TRA. Unfortunately, fully implementing such change is time consuming and involves changing agency policy. Historically, and even now, prospective adoptive parents are often simply asked about the characteristics of a child that they are willing to accept, such as which ethnic groups (full or biracial), the level drug use or

exposure, or what developmental disabilities. Thus, it is in the best interest of the child for any agency that does TRA placements/matches to make some sort of an assessment of the prospective adoptive parents for their level of cultural competence and their willingness to accept learning as a lifetime commitment.

Currently, there are two different means for measuring preparedness for TRA. The first is a self-assessment booklet that was developed by the founder's of a Northern California agency that specializes in children of color (Hall & Steinberg, 1998). The second one was recently developed and validated for use with either pre-adoptive parents or post-adoptive parents (Massatti, Vonk & Gregoire, 2004). Neither of these surveys is intended to exclude anyone from being able to adopt a child from a different race, but they are both to be used as a guide for what areas need to be developed. Most of the same issues and training apply to those people who adopt internationally, especially if the child's ethnicity is visibly different than the adoptive parents. If every agency or adoption provider began to use these tools in their practices, then the new generation of transracial adoptive parents would be better prepared for the challenges that face them and their children.

3c. The issues that will remain unresolved are that despite the increased incidence and acceptance of TRA, it is doubtful that our society will ever be successful in completely eradicating racism. There are also individuals that will feel that they shouldn't have to participate in services since biological parents do not require training beyond simple parenting classes. With the busy schedules that today's parents tend to keep, it is also possible that many TRA parents will find it difficult to create the time to participate in these services. In addition, from its origin the foster care system has been over-populated with children of color (African American, Latino, Native American). Societies ills (e.g., poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, crime, teen pregnancy)

are the underlying reasons for these children being placed into foster care or being relinquished for adoption, and they are not going to disappear. Thus, minority children will continue to need safe, nurturing homes. Some parents who adopt internationally may feel that they need to provide only minimal efforts to maintain some level of openness in their child's adoption and often this is not even possible. There is a new trend in the field that even if direct contact with an international birth family is not possible (Guibault, Correa & Guibault, 2004), that staying connected with the child's past and culture by traveling to the child's country of origin is a beneficial option.

4. The interventions that are discussed herein focus on three areas. The first area is at the policy level. The policies that have been written that impact TRA, such as MEPA and IEP, were created primarily to more efficiently find families for children of color. The overrepresentation of children of color in the foster care system was the primary driving force behind these laws (Frasch, Brooks, Reich & Wind, 2004). Another element to these laws is that the child welfare system, through both public and private agencies, needs to become more effective in recruiting adoptive and foster parents within various ethnic groups, so that the children of color in need of families have the possibility of staying in their birth culture.

The second area of intervention is that when a child is part of a TRA, the parents need to be properly prepared. One of the arguments against whites raising African American (Hollingsworth, 1998) or Latino (Andujo, 1988) children is that the parents cannot possibly understand racism because they do not have experience as a member of a minority population. This argument could be used to advocate on behalf of gay and lesbian adoption in that this population does experience discrimination and therefore they would have the coping skills to raise a child of color. As long as there are more white families hoping to become parents and not

an equal number of white children in need of a home, the child welfare system needs take responsibility to ensure that these parents are prepared to offer and provide the best possible upbringing for their child of color.

The third area of intervention is at the level of the professionals who work in the child welfare system. Historically, the majority of child welfare workers have been white, and interestingly it is often the African American social workers that oppose TRA (NABSW, 1972; Carter-Black, 2002). African American social workers who were interviewed generally opposed TRA, and three concepts emerged from the study which were, making sure the child's needs were prioritized, correcting the unresponsiveness of the child welfare system and considering the potential harmful effects of MEPA-IEP (Carter-Black, 2002). The author concludes that resources within child welfare need to shift from being defensive to "pursuing strategies to enhance the successful outcomes for adoptive families and their children" (p. 9). The need to develop cultural competence among social work professionals has been reported as a necessity in order to support and sustain healthy client-system functioning (McPhatter, 1997). This author defines ten foundational components to be considered in determining the cultural competence of child welfare workers. Another study goes one step further in assessing and analyzing how agencies can implement organizational changes to become culturally competent at the level of workers, supervisors and management (Nybell & Gray, 2004). Thus, the need for all child welfare agencies to create a culturally competent organization would not only benefit agencies that facilitate TRA, but all types of agencies who serve oppressed client populations.

5a. Work is currently in progress by the author of this paper to survey parents of TRA to measure their level cultural competence utilizing the Transracial Adoptive Parenting Scale (Massatti, Vonk & Gregoire, 2004). The intent of the study is to compare self-perceived levels of

cultural competence between parents of children belonging to different ethnic groups. The TRA parents will also be surveyed to determine if they utilized support and education services prior to or after their adoption. One of the main goals of this study is to determine what type of support and educational services TRA parents would use. It is hoped that the results of studies such as this will help agencies in developing comprehensive programs for TRA parents.

5b. Most parents do not take classes on child development, they learn from experiencing parenthood and consulting professionals such as their pediatrician, child caregivers or teachers. Social work students are taught child development as part of their coursework and it is important for them to understand that there are four developmental domains (physical, cognitive, social and emotional) that are developed as a child grows (Rycus & Hughes, 1998). For individuals who parent a child from a different ethnic group, there are additional considerations with regards to the development of racial identity. Steinberg and Hall (2000) provide an excellent resource for guiding the TRA parent through these considerations. In addition, there is a body of literature available that addresses and proposes ethnic identity models specifically for biracial individuals (Aldarondo, 2001). Many children of TRA are in fact biracial, but it is also reasonable to consider that there is a great similarity between children of TRA and biracial individuals (McRoy & Hall, 1996). In this regard, many of the same issues that biracial individuals face can be applied to children of TRA and social workers should consider utilizing some of the guidelines set forth in the literature for counseling biracial individuals.

5c. Child welfare has historically focused on serving children whose parents do not have the means to care for them, who are not available (orphans, incarcerated, or maltreatment) or who lack the capacity to care for them at that point in their life. These children have frequently been either immigrants and/or children of color. Thus, oppression and minority group membership are

key factors that contribute to the need for TRA practice. Children who are adopted out of the foster care system are likely to fit into one or both of these classifications. Infants who are placed into adoptive homes through agencies or independent arrangements are often born to mothers who can't afford to raise them at this point in their lives, thus even white birthmothers frequently have economic reasons for placing their child into an adoptive home. For these reasons and those discussed earlier in the paper, it is imperative that the workers in child welfare agencies are culturally competent to provide the best service possible to their clients regardless of the reasons that bring the clients to them.

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