Self-esteem and racial identity in transracial and inracial adoptees

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Does the self-esteem of black children who have been transracially adopted differ from that of black children who have been placed with black adoptive families? This exploratory study suggests that there is no difference. However, there seems to be a difference in perception of racial identity, which is an element that may be independent of self-concept as traditionally measured.

Transracial adoption, adoption of children of one racial background by families of another racial background, has become increasingly controversial during the past decade. Day estimated in 1979 that over fifteen thousand black children had been placed with white adoptive families. Major questions underlying this practice are: Can a family from one racial background help a child from a different racial background develop positive self-esteem and an appropriate racial identity? How do transracial adoptees perceive themselves? In what ways do the self-esteem and racial identity of black children raised in white families differ from that of black children raised in black families? Is either the black or the white adoptive setting better than the other in this regard?

Symbolic interaction theory postulates that a person's self-concept, including self-esteem, arises out of the social experience of interaction with other people. Major influences on the development of self-concept include (1) communication directly from other people about the self, (2) comparison of the self with others in the immediate environment, and (3) the role assigned to the individual by the community.

The social situation of children in both transracial and inracial adoptive settings is obviously complex. (The term "inracial" refers to situations in which the adoptee and the adopting family are of the same race.) The interaction processes are complicated not only by the role adjustments demanded in adoption but also by the multiple references for developing a sense of self-esteem.

Accordingly, the research questions explored in this study were the following: (1) Do differences exist between the self-esteem of black children who have been adopted by white families and that of black children who have been adopted by black families? and (2) Are the perceptions of racial identity of black children raised in black families different from those of black children raised in white families?

Method

A purposive sample of two groups of families was selected to participate in this study: a group of thirty white families who had adopted black children, and a group of thirty black families who had adopted black children. Purposive sampling, which is often used in exploratory studies, assumes that the researcher has enough information about the population and variables of interest to select individuals or units typical of the population.

At the time of the research, the sixty families were residing in the Southwest, Midwest, and Upper Midwest regions of the United States and were identified through adoption agencies and adoptive parent groups. To qualify for participation in the study, each family had to meet the following criteria: (1) it had to have a black adopted child who was at least 10 years of age and who had been in the adoptive home for at least one year, (2) at least one of the child's birth parents had to have been black, and (3) both members of the adoptive couple had to be of the same race.

An attempt was made to select clusters of black and white families living in proximity to one another so that the exploratory comparisons between the two groups might be more valid. Although it was not possible to stratify...
TABLE 1. Racial Background of the Adopted Children in the Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Racial Background of Child</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>White</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/Black</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/White</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/Mexican</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/Latin American</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black/Indian</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black/Korean</td>
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</table>

* Column totals less than 100 percent because of rounding.

This sample, both the black and white families were similar in important background characteristics: length of marriage, marital history, size of community of residence, current age, age at placement of the adopted child, religion, and income. The majority (85 percent) of the study participants were married, had been married for over fifteen years, and lived in large metropolitan areas. The adoptive mothers ranged in age from 27 to 69, and the adoptive fathers from 28 to 72. The mothers' ages at placement ranged from 24 to 51, and the fathers' ages from 27 to 58. The majority of all the participants belonged to Protestant denominations and were employed in professional or technical positions. Eighty-three percent of the adoptive families earned more than twenty thousand dollars a year.

The two groups were dissimilar in the educational level of the mothers and fathers, the percentage of mothers employed outside the home, and family size and composition. Twenty percent of the black fathers and 53 percent of the black mothers had completed college, compared to 84 percent of the white fathers and 80 percent of the white mothers in the study. Sixty-two percent of the black adoptive mothers and 51 percent of the white adoptive mothers were employed in professional or managerial positions. However, 86 percent of the white adoptive fathers and only 37 percent of the black adoptive fathers were employed in such positions.

Sixty percent of the white adoptive mothers were employed outside the home, compared to 83 percent of the black adoptive mothers. Although the total annual income of both groups of families was similar, the income level for black families in most cases represented the earnings of both the husband and wife.

There were also differences in number of children in the black and white families. The mean number of children for black families was 4.6 and for white families 6.2. Forty percent of the white families in the sample and 60 percent of the black families had adopted more than one black child.

The majority of the transracial adoptive families (87 percent) were living in predominantly white areas, and their black adopted children were attending predominantly white schools. In contrast, the majority of black adoptive families (70 percent) were living in predominantly black areas and their children were attending predominantly black schools.

Comparisons were also made between the black and white families regarding the following characteristics of their adopted children: race, sex, age at placement, and years of schooling. The adoptive parents in the purposive sample listed six different categories to denote their children's racial backgrounds. As Table 1 indicates, 55 percent were listed as having black birth parents, and 36 percent had black fathers and white mothers. Black families were more likely to have adopted children of two black birth parents, and white families in the sample were more likely to have adopted children of racially mixed parentage.

Of the sixty children in the study, thirty-seven (62 percent) were male and twenty-three (38 percent) were female. The mean age of the children in the study was 13.5 years. Most of them (67 percent) had completed an average of eight years of school.

Eighty percent of the children in the study had been in foster care prior to their current adoptive placement. At the time of placement, the adopted children ranged from less than 1 year old to 14 years.

Thus, although there were some important differences, the black and the white adoptive families were comparable on several key demographic variables. Furthermore, the transracial sample was quite similar in demographic characteristics to transracial adoptive families studied by other researchers, notably Grow and Shapiro and Zastrow. The characteristics of the inracial sample were similar to those of Shireman and Johnson's sample of black adoptive families. It must be stressed, however, that because the findings and interpretations in this exploratory study are based on purposive sampling, they should not be cautiously generalized to the population of transracial and inracial adoptive families.

The major dependent variable in this study was the self-esteem of the black adopted child. Self-esteem was operationally defined as the Total Positive Overall Level of Self-Esteem Score, a single summative index on the Tennessee Self Concept Scale. High scorers on this item tend to like themselves and to feel that they are persons of worth; low scorers tend to doubt their selfworth. A supplementary measure of the child's self-concept, the Twenty Statements Test, was also utilized. This test assesses the self-concept directly by asking the respondent to reply
TABLE 2. COMPARISON OF THE TRANSRACIALLY AND INRACIALLY ADOPTED BLACK CHILDREN'S LOW, MEDIUM, AND HIGH SCORES IN SELF-ESTEEM ON THE TENNESSEE SELF-CONCEPT SCALE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score Categories</th>
<th>Race of Adoptive Family</th>
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</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Black Family</td>
<td>White Family</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
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<td>Percentage</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

χ² = .012  df = 2 (NS).

twenty times to the question, "Who Am I?" Both measures were administered to the adopted children during face-to-face interviews. The children were also asked to respond orally to a ninety-five item interview schedule that addressed family relationships, peer relationships, school and community environment, and perception of racial identity.

During separate face-to-face interviews, the adoptive parents were administered the Tennessee Self Concept Scale and a ninety-item interview schedule that focused on demographic characteristics of the family, adoption experiences, the child's community and school environment, family relationships, and the parents' perceptions of and attitudes toward the child's racial identity. To assess overall family functioning, each parent was given the Family Adaptability and Cohesiveness Evaluation Scale.

To control for possible reactive effects caused by the race of the interviewer, parents as well as children were interviewed by a team consisting of one black member and one white member.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

No significant differences was found in the self-esteem scores of the two respondent groups. The mean Total Positive Overall Self-Esteem Score for transracially adopted black children was 348.9 as compared to 348.7 for inracially adopted black children. Thus, all sixty black children, regardless of adoptive setting, were nearly identical in their reports of self-worth as measured by the Tennessee Self Concept Scale.

The self-esteem scores ranged from 294 to 420 for adoptees in black families and from 293 to 413 for adoptees in white families. Table 2 reveals that the distribution of scores for the two groups of adopted children was nearly identical.

A comparison of the mean self-esteem scores for the two respondent groups to the mean for the population used to establish norms for the Tennessee Self Concept Scale provides an additional dimension to the analysis. The self-esteem scores for the adopted children of both black and of white families were similar to the mean for the norm population. The mean for the norm population of 626 respondents on the Total Positive Overall Self-Esteem Score was 345.6, not significantly different statistically from the mean for the transracially adopted (348.9) and the inracially adopted (348.7) children.

To ascertain whether variables other than the race of the adoptive family were related to adoptees' self-esteem scores, additional statistical tests were conducted using the following as independent variables: parents' self-esteem; parents' income; length of current placement; child's age; child's perception of academic ability; child's perception of parents' attitudes; child's sex; child's perception of racial identity; family functioning, cohesiveness, and adaptability; and the racial composition of the community or school. No statistically significant associations were found.

The self-esteem scores of black and of white mothers and fathers were also found to be similar and comparable to the norm population. Subsequent analyses of associations between adoptees' self-esteem and parents' Tennessee Self Concept Scale Scores, age, level of education, income level, occupation, and marital status also yielded no findings that were statistically significant.

The Tennessee Self Concept Scale measures overall self-esteem through a procedure called implicit derived evaluation. Respondents do not evaluate themselves on a particular trait such as racial identity or feelings of differentness. Instead, respondents describe themselves by indicating how true a particular descriptive statement is of them. Statements related to physical self, behavior, moral and ethical self, and family and social self were provided.

As indicated in Tables 3 and 4, content analyses of the respondents' self-descriptions on the Twenty State-

TABLE 3. RESPONDENTS' SELF-DESCRIPTIONS ON THE TWENTY STATEMENTS TEST—USE OF THE TERM "ADOPTED"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-reference Statement</th>
<th>Race of Adoptive Family</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Black Child/ Black Family</td>
<td>Black Child/ White Family</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used term &quot;adopted&quot;</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not use term &quot;adopted&quot;</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

χ² = 5.69  df = 1  p < .05.
ments Test revealed that there were some statistically significant differences between the two groups of black children regarding references to their racial background or to their adopted status. Transracially adopted children were more likely to identify themselves as being adopted and to use racial self-referents than intraracially adopted children. It seems plausible that transracially adopted children are more conscious of their racial group and adoptive status because their physical dissimilarity from their family and peers is a constant reminder. Furthermore, discussions about adoptions and race may be more common in transracial situations. The child may be more likely to be called on to explain his or her racial background and adoptive status to others.

The children and families in this study were extensively interviewed, using open-ended questions, to gather additional data on how families were handling issues of racial identity with their adopted children. Interview responses were analyzed according to the parents’ expressed attitudes toward the child’s racial identity and the parents’ consequent actions.

As stated earlier, the majority of the white families (87 percent) were living in predominantly white areas, and the children were attending predominantly white schools. The white adoptive families tended to feel confident and optimistic that they could provide a warm, nurturing home for their children despite racial differences between the child and the family. Of the twenty-two white families (73 percent) who chose to adopt racially mixed children, the majority (86 percent) stressed that their child was “biracial,” and they tended to define himself or herself as black and to feel positively about that. Transracially adopted black children who attended racially integrated schools and whose families resided in racially integrated communities and accepted their child’s black racial identity tended to feel positive about themselves as black persons. Families that deemphasized the importance of racial identity and made no efforts to provide black role models for their black children tended to rear children who seemed to devalue or not to acknowledge a black identity.

Some of the transracially adopted black children who had no contact with blacks in their neighborhood or school characterized blacks in the following ways: “blacks are poor,” “many are militant,” and “they use bad English.” The opportunity for establishing positive relationships with blacks on an ongoing, everyday basis seemed to be a key factor in the child’s reporting a positive racial identity and positive feelings toward other blacks. If the parents had normal and frequent contact with blacks and if the child, in turn, had similar experiences, the child seemed to develop positive racial feelings.

**CONCLUSIONS**

This exploratory study indicated that there were no differences in overall self-esteem between the sampled transracially and intraracially adopted children. Furthermore, the level of self-esteem of the adoptees was as high as that reported among individuals in the general population. This suggests that positive self-esteem can be generated as effectively among black children in white adoptive families as in black adoptive families.
However, there appeared to be a difference between the transracial and inracial adoptees in their sense of racial identity. Racial identity seemed to be more of a problem for the black children who were being reared by white families. Such factors as the family's nurturance of the child's black identity, the child's access to black role models and peers in the community and in school, and the parents' attention to the child's black heritage seemed to be influential in the shaping of a positive racial identity.

These findings tend to support the separate observations of Porter, McCa done, and Cross. They suggest self-esteem and racial self-perception may operate independently in black adopted children.12

The results and interpretations of this study, based as they are on a limited purposive sample, need to be validated with research that uses a larger and more comprehensive sample of the population of transracial and inracial adoptive families. Nonetheless, these exploratory findings provoke some reflections about adoption policy.

Since the development of a positive sense of racial identity seems, from this study, more difficult in transracial than in inracial adoptions, adopting families should be aware of and accept the child's black racial background. Children's racial attitudes toward themselves are likely to be influenced by the attitudes and practices of the adoptive parents. White adoptive parents should be capable of realistically perceiving the child's racial heritage as different from their own, and they should be willing to make changes conducive to the child's development of a positive racial identity. These changes might include moving to an integrated neighborhood and enrolling the child in an integrated school, thus providing the child with opportunities to interact with black role models and to have relationships with black peers. Moreover, the child's racial identity could be served by the parents' establishing sustained social relationships with black families. Although most white families applying to adopt black children probably can provide loving homes for the children, not all of them can fulfill black children's need to feel positive about their black identity.

Should agencies develop policies that favor inracial over transracial adoptees? The findings of this exploratory study that inracial and transracial adoptees develop similar levels of positive self-esteem do not in themselves support such a policy. However, the findings concerning differences in adoptees' development of racial identity suggest that, following the recommendations of the Child Welfare League of America, when and if transracial adoptions are necessary, agencies should have specific criteria to use in the selection of transracial adoptive families.13 Consequently, it would be helpful for adoption agencies to investigate not only the prospective family but also the total racial milieu in which the child will be socialized. Furthermore, agencies could usefully offer postadoption consultation for transracial adoptive families to help the parents facilitate the development of a positive and unambiguous racial identity in the child.

NOTES AND REFERENCES


11. Ibid.


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