

“Being Raised by White People”: Navigating Racial Difference Among Adopted Multiracial Adults

There are increasing numbers of multiracial families created through marriage, adoption, birth, and a growing population of multiracial persons. Multiracials are a hidden but dominant group of transracially adopted children in both the United Kingdom and the United States. This paper introduces findings from an interpretive study of 25 transracially adopted multiracials regarding a set of experiences participants called “being raised by White people.” Three aspects of this experience are explored: (1) the centrality yet absence of racial resemblance, (2) navigating discordant parent-child racial experiences, and (3) managing societal perceptions of transracial adoption. Whereas research suggests some parents believe race is less salient for multiracial children than for Black children, this study finds participants experienced highly racialized worlds into adulthood.

The realities of adoption and adoption seeking in America lie at the nexus of this country’s constructions of race, family, and socio-political power (Quiroz, 2007). Often at odds are the desires and economic resources of adopters to create families, the access to family preservation services for biological parents, and the needs of children who, once removed, require timely and holistically nur-

turing permanent placements. The most publicly debated and emotionally contentious issues in adoption policy and practice are those related to race. These debates typically reduce the child welfare problem for children of color (primarily African American) to a conflict between those who advocate for their cultural needs and rights and those who advocate for their needs and rights to timely adoption. Timely adoption for children of color has become synonymous with their “transracial” placement into White families. These battles occur not only in adoption policy and practice, but they also are publicly showcased on talk shows, in special-feature articles, and in movies (e.g., *Losing Isaiah*; Trenka, Oparah, & Shin, 2006). Only 2.5% of all households include adopted children and less than 24% of these adoptions are reported as transracial (Kreider, 2003). Still, powerful emotions are evoked by the mere mention of transracial adoption. There continues to be little “middle ground” regarding this family type (Courtney, 1997).

Indeed, transracial adoption policy, practice, and research often miss opportunities to illuminate the complexity of transracial adoptive family systems and the developmental needs of children within these families that are shared, as well as those that are distinct (Frasch & Brooks, 2003). Moreover, this author is unaware of any study that directly examines the effects of decades-long wars between “camps” of researchers, parents, and racial-ethnic communities on one’s developing sense of self as transracially adopted—a contested family identity (Miranda, 2004). As noted by Trenka et al. (2006) in their anthology on transracial adoption, “transracial adoptees swim in the murky waters between these conflicting

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This article was edited by Ralph LaRossa.

Key Words: adoption, family diversity, family processes, kinship, multiracial, qualitative research.

accounts.... [W]e live within this constant paradox, aware that our very lives are acts of transgression” (pp. 4 – 5). This study sought to examine how one group of multiracial adults navigated these “murky waters” of race and adoption and to expose where these murky waters exist. The analysis uses adoption research and multiracial literature to illustrate shared and distinct experiences facing persons who are both transracially adopted and multiracial. This analysis is then used to challenge parental assumptions about racial salience for multiracial children and to extend theories of racial socialization to this group by placing the constructions of mixed race and transracial adoption as central to the developmental context in which White adoptive parents must help their multiracial children to navigate their feelings of perceived racial difference in contexts within and external to their White family systems.

This paper uses *multiracial* as an umbrella term. Restricting the focus to Black-White heritage, however, acknowledges that the collective identities of so-called multiracial individuals are also uniquely informed by cultural norms within a given racial-ethnic community (Ifekwunigwe, 2004). This analysis recognizes the language and associated categories of “race” as flawed but as an important socially and legally constructed system of meaning around which individuals form social identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Finally, highlighting the experiences of this group does not imply a corresponding assessment of their experiences as harder or easier than those of other groups of adopted persons. Nor does it deny potentially shared experiences with other racial-ethnic populations. In fact, I ultimately argue that participants share race-related experiences, coping strategies, and a need for deliberate approaches to parenting with other marginalized communities and family systems also perceived as “different” in society.

THE MEANING OF BLACK-WHITE MULTIRACIALITY IN ADOPTION POLICY, PRACTICE, AND PARENTING

Most Black children are not adopted by White parents; increasing evidence, however, suggests that multiracial children with Black-White heritage may be an exception (Miranda, 2004; Trenka et al., 2006). As no official or systematic recording of racial-ethnic heritage exists in either public or private adoption in the United States, it is impossible to fully determine patterns in placement

outcomes for any group of children. Yet a study by Thoburn, Norford, and Rashid (2000) indicates that Black children with one White biological parent are most likely to be placed with White adopters in the United Kingdom. Further, these same children dominate the sample populations within U.S. studies on transracial adoption of Black children (Miranda, 2004). Indeed, historical reviews of transracial adoption indicate the first wave of transracial placements of Black children in the United States involved almost exclusively children of Black-White descent (Davis, 1991).

There are many reasons why multiracial children might disproportionately be placed with White families. One factor is the persistent unmet demand for healthy White infants. Scholars note that this has increased the “adoptability” of infants with Black-White heritage compared with those whose parents are both identified as Black (McRoy & Grape, 1999; Quiroz, 2007). Since the 1950s, agencies have bent traditional social norms of racial categorization (i.e., the one-drop rule) that ascribe Black identities to persons with any amount of Black heritage in an effort to attract White adopters to available multiracial infants (Miranda, 2004). Despite some opposition to separating multiracial children from Black children (National Association of Black Social Workers, 1972), historical analyses reveal a distinct treatment of multiracial children by both agencies and prospective adopters.

Parents have choice in the children they adopt. A review of statements in the transracial adoption literature about pre-adoptive decisions reveals a distinct racial preference for “part-White” among some White couples (McRoy & Grape, 1999). Parents typically indicate one or more of four primary beliefs that support adopting children with a White biological parent even over African American children with lighter complexions: (1) they will have “more in common” with a multiracial child, (2) they feel a more legitimate (i.e., biological) tie to a child with whom they partially share a racial heritage, (3) they feel less guilt about “taking the child away” from the Black community, and (4) a racially mixed child will be less visibly different and “easier to explain” to relatives, neighbors, and friends (see McRoy & Grape, 1999; McRoy & Zurcher, 1983; Steinberg & Hall, 2000). Parents, however, also indicate that transracial adoption is a testimony to the civil rights movement and racial integration (Patton, 2000). One might imagine that these racial

beliefs could inform parental racial socialization efforts.

Adoption studies rarely analyze outcomes for Black-White multiracials separately (Miranda, 2004). Still, there are some findings that hint at a distinct set of experiences in their biological families, in foster care, and in adoption. First, intrafamilial racism (as opposed to structural racism) may be among the primary reasons this group of children enters care. In a case review of eight child welfare agencies in Indiana, Folaron and Hess (1993) found that the Black-White multiracial children had endured severe racism from their White biological parent or at least one extended family member, or both, who was noted in case records as “prejudiced.” The fact that the White biological mothers in this study reported pressures from their families to abandon their multiracial children coincides with other research on adopted adults who report being surrendered because of their Black heritage (Miranda, 2004; Patton, 2000). Second, once removed from biological families, research suggests that these children are often socialized by their foster and adoptive parents in ways that emphasize their White racial heritage. One foster parent is quoted instructing the Black-White multiracial children in her home thus: “We tell them that in this home we just let our White sides show” (Folaron & Hess, p. 117). Likewise, White adoptive parents seem to prefer the racial label “biracial” to African American/Black but do not socialize children to also be *bicultural*. Instead, transracially adopted children tend to be raised in predominantly White communities and cultural contexts, report discomfort with their racial appearances, and struggle in social interactions with African Americans as adolescents (DeBerry, Scarr, & Weinberg, 1996; McRoy & Zurcher, 1983; Patton, 2000). Therefore, although these children, like the other transracially adopted participants, indicate high levels of parental attachment and progress well through school, the same studies report that their competence and sense of belonging in predominantly African American contexts are diminished partly because of parental choices in racial socialization (DeBerry et al.). The findings of this study are used to complicate parental conceptions of multiraciality and transracial adoption, that being “part-White” and adopted by White parents diminishes the role of race in a child’s life. Instead, findings suggest transracial adoption and multiraciality can exacerbate

an adopted person’s sense of difference as grounded in race, underscoring the need for parents to teach children strategies for navigating a racialized existence that will endure into adulthood.

RACIAL SOCIALIZATION AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF RACE AND FAMILY

One of the first things we notice about people ... is their race ... to provide clues about *who* a person is.... When we encounter someone whom we cannot ... categorize—someone who is ... racially mixed, ... [s]uch an encounter becomes a source of discomfort and ... a crisis of racial meaning. (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 59)

The existence of persons who are racially “mixed” is not new, and social science has widely accepted race as a social and not a biological construct. Still, racial categories, in particular “Black” and “White,” operate as mutually exclusive biologically inherited master statuses in the United States: an assumed internal essence and core identity that are visually discernible through phenotypes that become racialized (Zack, 1993). Whereas Omi and Winant (1994) are referencing a *personal* crisis in racial meaning, Census 2000’s “check all that apply” approach to identifying race caused a *national* crisis in racial meaning. These changes reawakened identity politics paralleling those in transracial adoption, publicly calling into question the motivations of multiracial individuals (as opposed to agencies) who claim personal identities outside of the single-race category “Black.” It is likely that being both multiracial and transracially adopted would operate as mutually reinforcing affronts to these norms and folk theories of race.

Indeed, multiracials and transracial adoptive families encounter similar stereotypes, both positive and negative, because of the racial boundaries they cross. Both are viewed as racially “different” and experience stigma related to those differences (Ifekwunigwe, 2004). Transracial adoptive families and multiracial individuals contradict biological and monocentric race and kinship norms—that all family members and individuals embody a shared single racial identity and heritage. Our folk theories of race assert that transgression of these norms and racial borders results in internal conflict or confusion, particularly for the children involved (Dalmage, 2000;

Samuels, 2006). The daily lives of transracial adoptive families and multiracials are riddled with questions from strangers (e.g., “What are you?” “Is that your mother?”) requiring public defenses or declarations of one’s racial ties, authenticity, and allegiance within single-race communities (Dalmage, 2000; Register, 1990). Transracial adoptive families and multiracials are perceived by some as actual or potential racial “traitors” while being revered or idealized by others as the hope or proof of ending racial division (Dalmage, 2000; Samuels, 2006). These bodies of scholarship suggest race and racial stigma are highly salient for both populations.

Despite individual variances in phenomenological experiences of race, racialized discrimination and stigma are considered part of the normative ecological context in which all children of color must develop (Garcia Coll et al., 1996; Spencer, Dupree, & Hartman, 1997). In racial-ethnic minority families, racial socialization becomes a task of parenting that includes, among other goals, imparting strategies to cope with racial discrimination and stigma to promote healthy child development (McHale et al., 2006; Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005). The case of adopted multiracials can highlight potential challenges in the racial socialization process. Typically, racial socialization in families occurs between parents and children who share a racialized social status. Parents can rely on their own and their family’s intergenerational experience for parental insight (McHale et al.; Spencer et al.). In contrast, transracially adopted multiracials must learn how to navigate racialized stigma from parents whose racial status is not stigmatized. This shifts attention to the centrality of a shared parent-child racial status and *experience*, rather than a shared racial *heritage*, to inform racial socialization processes. Second, a child’s family and racial-ethnic minority community (often considered a secondary kinship network) are seen as places of retreat—protective contexts where one’s racialized self shifts to become a visual marker of one’s legitimate racial-ethnic belonging (Garcia Coll et al.). It is not automatically clear where (or if) adopted multiracials will find an automatic protective context and sense of shared racial experience and belonging. Who is the “same-race” community for multiracials who are adopted? To what racial-ethnic community can this group of children retreat to escape their racialized stigma? Certainly constructions of race and kinship are often

so narrowly defined that they constrain many persons in feeling a sense of belonging, racial or otherwise. Embodying racial ambiguity, however, adds a layer of visual difference that can racialize and extend adopted people’s feelings of alienation beyond their families into other key reference group experiences. Consequently, racial socialization processes in transracially adoptive families may entail distinct challenges because they are undertaken by parents whose healthy functioning or survival has not required skills to cope with racial stigma, and yet their children do require these skills for their healthy functioning and development (Rockquemore & Laszloffy). Likewise, as members of a contested family type and racial status, daily life becomes highly racialized in a contentious and public way (Dalmage, 2000). Taken together, findings from this study highlight the need for deliberate parental racial socialization strategies that recognize these challenges, including how Black and multiracial communities can offer important opportunities for children to access a sense of shared racial experience, insight, and belonging into adulthood (Jackson, 2008).

METHOD

This paper presents findings from an Extended Case Method (ECM) study of 25 adult Black-White multiracials, using in-depth interviews to explore their developmental experiences of race, culture, and kinship. The ECM is a hybrid case-based method that produces ecologically nested findings to extend existing conceptualizations or theories (Burawoy, 1998). As a scientific theory, it draws from both social constructivist *and* critical traditions, requiring multisystemic analyses of a unique case (see Burawoy; Samuels, 2008; Sullivan, 2002). Consequently, emic perspectives and experiences are inductively analyzed through a process of contextualization (rather than abstraction) within or against existing socio-political structures and concepts (e.g., received theory). In this way, ECM is an explicitly ecological approach to theorizing, using both inductive and deductive techniques to produce findings (Samuels, 2008; Sullivan, 2002). This analysis produced three broad patterns of identity work among the participants in this study: (1) “being raised by White people”—navigating racial difference, (2) searching for kinship and community—crafting cultural homes, and (3) expressing and claiming public

identities—the shifting meaning and expression of racial heritage. Here I report on the first set of these findings: being raised by White people, navigating racial difference. These findings both complicate parental conceptions of racial salience for adopted multiracials and extend racial socialization theories for relevance to this group whose mixed race heritage and adoptive backgrounds brought context-specific stigmas ascribed to their blackness and whiteness.

Sample and Data Collection

By definition, this is a regionally disparate and hard-to-recruit population. There are not “sides of town” or neighborhoods where multiracials or transracially adopted families and individuals reside, in which a researcher can become immersed, gain access, and conduct naturalistic inquiry. Not all adopted multiracials identify as multiracial. This study employed recruitment methods including print and web-based advertisements across the United States to African American, multiracial, and transracial adoption organizations and agencies; in conference brochures and magazines; in mailings to college student groups and adoption networks; as well as by word of mouth. The recruitment audit trail revealed a fairly even clustering across paper and Internet advertisements ($n = 9$), encouragement to participate from family and friends ($n = 10$), and snowball referrals from participants ($n = 6$). Criteria for inclusion were Black-White heritage, White adoptive parents, and a minimum age of 18.

Participants completed audiotaped, in-depth interviews (Johnson, 2001) lasting approximately 2 hours. All interviews were conducted by the author, transcribed verbatim, and downloaded into NVivo, a computer-assisted data management and analysis program. The quotes used in this paper make use of italics as the standard indicator of emphasis and capitalized letters to note increased volume (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984). Participants were given pseudonyms.

I began the interviews by asking participants to share their adoption stories, including what they knew about their birth families. Participants described their childhood communities, how they were raised to think about their racial heritages and adoptions, and if their insights or identities changed as they became adults. They shared their stories of searching for biological families, experiencing racism and prejudice inside their adoptive

and biological family systems, and the meaning of multiraciality and transracial adoption in both Black and White communities. Interviews ended by sharing advice to adopted persons, parents, and adoption professionals.

To enhance rigor during early stages of interviewing, I was involved in a research group to debrief and critique the interview and analysis process (Shek, Tan, & Han, 2005). As someone who is also multiracial and transracially adopted, debriefing with “outsiders” to multiraciality and transracial adoption challenged me to seek the nuance and detail in experiences that both diverged from, and reflected, my own. The analysis process also used many “checks and balances” to enhance the rigor and credibility of findings, including the use of multiple coders, audit trails, member checks, and critical case analyses (Shek et al.).

Analysis

This study used a multisystemic interpretive approach to analysis (see Samuels, 2008; Sullivan, 2002), beginning with inductively open coding the first five interviews in a research team of four people. This approach involved multiple reads of the transcripts, coding without the use of a start list of codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). One member of this team continued on as a research assistant, and together we developed a final coding scheme using a reflexive process similar to constant comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This included scrutinizing codes by searching for exceptions and disconfirming evidence, conducting member checks and follow-up interviews with participants whose experiences challenged or added complexity to the findings. Codes were refined, changed, combined, or omitted accordingly. These multiple passes through the data ultimately generated a final list of codes that were both descriptive (e.g., racial stigma) and conceptual (e.g., discordant parent-child experiences) and included *in vivo* codes that used participants’ language (e.g., being raised by White people). All transcripts were then double coded. In ECM, analysis is not exclusively a process of abstraction leading to the creation of theory, but rather it seeks to extend existing theory using findings derived through multisystemic analyses. This is achieved by asking questions of the data to expose patterns that may be uniquely shaped by broader contextual or socio-historical factors (Sullivan, 2002). For example, how are narratives

of kinship, mixed race, and blackness uniquely present in the participants' identity work and experiences of race? How do their identities reify or resist societal stigmas and constructions of multiraciality and transracial adoption? How are their experiences with Black peers embedded in historical constructions of Black-White mixed race (e.g., passing)? Although the study's overall aim was to broadly understand racial and cultural identity development, "being raised by White people" was the phrase participants consistently used to articulate the context of their development into adulthood. Their backgrounds as transracially adopted and "mixed" were used to explain their differences from ascribed reference groups, including African Americans and non-adopted multiracials, and the differences they felt existed between themselves and their adoptive parents. Through these experiences, they were made multiply "other." Analyses indicated they developed strategies of negotiation and subversion, including how to manage context-specific stigmas and when to disclose their White family memberships and multiraciality into adulthood.

About the Participants

The participants I spoke to were raised in predominantly White communities ($n = 22$) by married couples, most were female ($n = 16$), and all were adopted as infants. Many of their parents ($n = 20$) were still married. They were fairly dispersed across two age groupings, 19 to 25 ($n = 11$) and 26 to 32 ($n = 14$). Many lived as the only transracially adopted person in their adoptive families ($n = 16$). As in other studies (Patton, 2000), some were aware that their paths into adoption were largely caused by the undesirability of their Black heritage in their maternal White families ($n = 12$). Most had successfully completed a search for both biological parents ($n = 11$) or were searching at the time of our interview ($n = 6$). An additional 3 were only able to locate biological mothers. Five stated they had no interest in ever searching for their biological families. Of the 22 who grew up in predominantly White communities, only 2 remained in that community as an adult, and only 3 adults lived in their home states. This is a significantly higher migration pattern than is found in nationally representative samples, where only 35% of college graduates 5 years after graduation live outside of their home states (Kodrzycki, 2001).

It is important to first emphasize that participants conveyed both advantages and disadvantages of their adoptions. They frequently used words such as *opportunities* to describe how transracial adoption enhanced their lives. All mentioned advantages linked to success in mainstream contexts and noted travel, access to "good" education, and their middle- to upper-middle-class status among the positive benefits. Most had either completed ($n = 19$) or were in the process of completing ($n = 4$) a college degree. They frequently attributed being "worldly" and racially "open-minded" to their multiracial and transracial adoptive backgrounds. Additionally, 14 mentioned professional advantages—that being transracially adopted and multiracial enhanced their abilities to "relate to" people. As Sheila, age 30, notes, many felt compelled to share the insights they acquired through this experience with others: "In the long run, I feel like I have this HUGE gift to relate to people, to both worlds. *Nobody's* getting over on me. I feel it's my job ... to educate.... Sometimes I feel like that's my mission in life ... everywhere I go."

But this "gift" operating in their adulthoods perhaps came at a high cost during their childhoods. All participants' stories of growing up portrayed how their early feelings of difference became racialized and consumed by navigating incongruence between their lived experiences of race and that of others. In terms of more traditional outcome measures of adjustment (e.g., family attachment, educational attainment), all participants would be considered success stories. In terms of their identity work as people of color, an alternative and much more complex story emerges. This is the story presented in this paper. It is organized around three patterns that represent what participants called "being raised by White people," including (1) the centrality yet absence of racial resemblance, (2) navigating discordant parent-child experiences with race and racism, and (3) managing societal perceptions of multiraciality and transracial adoption. Ultimately, these findings indicate that although a multiracial adopted child's White heritage may help some White parents feel connected to the child, it does not facilitate a mutual racial connection or shared racial experience for the child. Instead, it facilitated a feeling of distinct racial complexity. As Melissa notes, "to make my life heaps more complicated not only am I transracially adopted but I'm also biracial!"

FINDINGS

It's taken a lot of intrinsic motivation on my part to really develop me. Just pulling things from friends, reading books, just ... walking around in my own skin. It's kind of *my job* to develop myself, and really make sure that I'm secure. And I still struggle with it, okay? I still have people calling me red bone and a half-breed. But really I've had to rely greatly on myself. (Monika, age 28)

The Centrality yet Absence of Racial Resemblance

As Monika's quote suggests, participants' racial socialization typically involved pulling together pieces of a puzzle across the life course largely on their own. Walking around in their own skin, a central marker of one's race, was inherently tied to the belief that most others around them did not share their racial experience. Additionally, they often lacked access to a racial community of similar others to help assemble important pieces of this puzzle. Most grew up in families and neighborhoods that were predominantly White, and the majority of participants ($n = 22$) had never been in a room of predominantly multiracial people. In a few cases ($n = 6$), participants had never met or seen anyone else who, like themselves, was both transracially adopted and multiracial. Even those who had adopted siblings did not always experience them as confidants or companions. Among the 9 participants who had transracially adopted siblings, only 3 had ever talked to their siblings about transracial adoption or any of their experiences with race or racism. Feeling racially alienated in lacking access to a community of others who possessed insight into their experience of race was a pattern threaded throughout all interviews.

But the centrality yet absence of physical resemblance is embedded in the identity work of most adopted persons (Frasch & Brooks, 2003; Lifton, 1995; March, 2000). This was true for Steven, who grew up in a predominantly White, Midwestern town of 50,000. At 26, he lives in a major East Coast city and is a successful entrepreneur. During his interview, he shared how he felt distant because he did not look like his family. Even though he had two transracially adopted sisters, he still envied families whose biological connections were visibly obvious:

I was always fascinated ... all though my life ... when you see family units ... and can recognize

similarities. I never had that. I always ... compare it to the movie ET. There's that ... classic scene in the closet and he's watching the kids interact as human beings. He's so fascinated with this that he's just sitting there with these big eyes. And that's how I always feel. 'Cause I can't identify with that.

In U.S. culture, the dominant frame for legitimizing kinship ties is through one's resemblance to other family members in physical and personal traits. Through "resemblance talk" (Becker, Butler, & Nachtigall, 2005) of whom one "looks like" in the family (March, 2000), we authenticate our sense of self, familial belonging, and very existence. A racialized physical resemblance also marks one's membership in a racial-ethnic community. For those in this study, embodying racial ambiguity as multiracials and being transracially adopted meant that the lack of physical resemblance they experienced, both within and external to their family systems, was often racialized by others. Consequently, they too came to conflate their unshared biological origins and their unshared racial appearances—transracial adoption and multiraciality came to collectively symbolize an adoption experience as synonymous with a chronic sense of racial difference.

For example, participants often racialized "blood bonds," attributing parental insight as naturally emerging from a shared racialized biology with their children. It was the unshared Black heritage, however, and not shared White heritage with their parents that was salient. Here, Sheila, who earlier spoke of transracial adoption's positives, says she felt disconnected from her adoptive family because they did not look like her racially. This caused her to question their parental insights as relevant. Further, lacking connections not only with Black persons but with persons who were multiracial, Sheila and others noted the lack of a racial reference group as leaving them racially alone to "fend" for their own survival in a highly race conscious world:

Somebody who's always grown up looking like their family ... everything just comes natural. But with me, *everything* was questionable. They're my family, but I'm not totally like them. What could my parents teach me about being me, when they don't know what it's like to be around White people and always be different? To always *look* different. They can teach me what it means to be like them, which is pretty much what happened. When I looked at them, I didn't see me. You know ... I saw THEM (motions away from herself).

You're constantly ... on the battlefield ... out there to fend for yourself and it's like you just never have anything to compare yourself to. You're always alone from the git-go, even though you're NOT. Even though your family's *there* with you—you're still always alone.

Even those who were extremely fair-skinned felt racially alone in their White adoptive families and neighborhoods. Here Rene, whose appearance frequently caused others to assume she was White, shares her doubts that her parents' wisdom could be insightful for her racialized future:

You do look to your parents to a certain extent... I didn't feel my destiny was tied to my parents necessarily. I'd look back and say, "What does that mean for *me*? Where am I supposed to go based on *that*?" It didn't fit me. It was hurtful ... to not have my mother be able to tell me something about that part of me that caused my life to be so different.

As participants discussed the centrality of race as a master status in their lives, many noted that this did not inform their parents' racial socialization strategies. Instead, most participants noted that their parents endorsed various levels of colorblindness ($n = 23$), described as parental preferences to reject racial categorizations entirely ($n = 3$) or preferences to see "people as people" ($n = 20$) or both. Although a small subgroup of parents consciously chose diverse neighborhoods, moving the entire family out of a predominantly White community ($n = 3$), most experienced the structuring of family life in ways that mirrored how their parents had been raised. This meant that like many upwardly mobile White middle-class families, their parents worked hard to provide them with better educations and opportunities than were had by earlier generations. Their success in providing these socioeconomic advantages was noted among all. Few parents, however, placed equal value on providing consistent, daily opportunities for their children's Black or multiracial socialization. It is not surprising, therefore, that participants' advice emphasized the importance of having consistent daily access to people and places where they could even partially blend in racially, something they felt was impossible to do with their White parents. Todd's ability to hang out with the parents of his Black friends offered an important respite from being a transracially adopted child: "It was a comfort zone. I was in the mall with my friend and his parents who were Black. And it

was already uncool to be in the mall with your parents ... being that my mom was White made it even worse. So being with this Black lady, even though she wasn't my mom ... there was still a chance that I could be her son. It was such a nice feeling to blend in." Because there can be significant variation in skin tone within Black families, some participants were able to "pass" as nonadopted biological family members. In this case, norms that ascribe Black identities to persons with any amount of Black heritage (i.e., the one-drop rule) allow space for adopted multiracials to access a sense of racial resemblance that is not afforded to them in their White families and neighborhoods. In this instance, the Black community was a place where participants could experience physical resemblance through racial resemblance. Yet only 2 participants reported that their childhood contexts provided regular opportunities to access this experience.

This study also found that White parents' endorsement of colorblindness meant that, in participants' perspectives, parents also did not discuss racism in advance of the child's experience of it. Instead, discussions about race, ethnicity, or racism only occurred when it was a problem that the children brought to the attention of parents.

Navigating Discordant Parent-Child Experiences With Race and Racism

You know my parents never discussed race with me ... EVER. I think they felt that if they ignored my ethnicity, it would kind of go away. And a lot of other kids would ask me questions. But by the time I was 10, the questions turned into insults. (Sheri, 32)

Only 4 participants felt their parents were proactive in providing racial socialization throughout their childhoods, noting race and racism as natural and comfortable topics of conversation. Some described parents as "re-active" and told stories of horrified mothers or fathers storming a school principal's office to demand an end to racism at the school. Most ($n = 23$), however, were instructed that *they* deal with racism more passively. This included dismissing racism within the framework of other types of childhood name-calling and rationalizing that the offender was flawed. It was that person's loss and not the child's if the racial hostility continued. Lauren's family was among the small subgroup who

lived in a racially diverse community. Still, her parents preferred she dismiss racism and the perpetrator as having a problem. This is reflected in her statement on coping with intrafamilial racism, "I have family members that look at me and they very much see 'n---r'—that's their loss. I know who I am and I'm not confused." Although effective on some levels, this approach overlooked that children also experienced loss when racism continued—in Lauren's case it was the loss of a family relationship.

Although 9 others also mentioned racially prejudiced extended family members, ongoing intrafamilial racism was an issue among a small number of participants ($n = 3$). For most, these family members were either excluded from the child's life or later had a "change of heart" and grew to accept the child. Acceptance did not mean a complete change in worldview. It typically involved seeing the child as an exception or viewing the child as "not really Black." Additionally, participants coped by dismissing the prejudice as "old-school" thinking, and the perpetrators as "too old to change."

Parents of this generation of adopted multiracials were described as often unable to appreciate the unique weight of racial epithets when one is the target of them. Consequently, their advice and colorblind philosophies failed to map on to participants' racial experiences and need to navigate a racialized world differently than their parents. As Brad noted, "There was this huge disconnect between what I was taught and what was outside." In most cases, children eventually confronted their parents about this racial disconnect. Monika remembered this confrontational moment with her parents as an adolescent. For her, passive resistance was no longer working:

One time we really clashed and I said, "Look. You are both White. You are not Black. You're not a person of color. It's not easy for me, when someone is walking behind me saying all of these racial epithets to me ... that I can't get angry? I don't think you understand how it feels to be stripped like that."

Kirsten, who described her appearance as "White and Italian-looking," and her parents as not colorblind, was the only one who was raised in a Black community. Still, she experienced racial discordance with her parents when they, desiring to provide a "good education," enrolled her in a predominantly White private high school. When she started having problems,

her parents misjudged them as adoption issues, not related to race or racism, and sent her to therapy:

I just felt like, just because mom went there [the private high school] and grandma *worked* there does not mean everybody there is going to accept *me*. I don't think they wanted to deal with that. They even dragged me to therapy. And I remember the therapist questioning me about being adopted. And I'm like, "UGH! That is not the issue. The issue is kids picking on me every day and calling me n---r from the back of the classroom." THIS IS THE PROBLEM—saying that I should go back south and eat watermelon. I'm angry at my parents because they're making me go to this school and be tormented.

Sometimes parents publicly endorsed concepts of racial socialization for Black children that participants felt they failed to execute at home. Steven recalled attending his family's church when a visiting Black minister preached about the importance of racial socialization for Black children and his parents not including him as having these same needs: "I remember him talking about how it's really important to immerse Black children in their culture. And my parents were just smiling and agreeing and I was just sitting there ... bubbling with anger because I was like—*that's NOT what we had!* We were raised in this area ... opposite from what we were!"

Ultimately, parental colorblindness meant children often navigated a highly racialized world on their own. Likewise, despite some advantages, growing up in a White community was often viewed as a loss of self and racial kinship that was most fully realized upon leaving home:

I've talked to other friends of mine who were adopted in White families. When we talk, there's some anger there. You feel like you're just set up. Unless you continue to stay. If I continued to live in [hometown] in what is ... a bubble. But when you DO get out there, and ... realize just how much you missed out on, culturally and knowledge of *ourselves*, knowledge that it takes for survival in certain situations, it *does* make you angry. You know? A little bit. On the other side of that though, my parents have also given me things that are rare. And the perspective I have on race relations, how society looks at race, is completely *wide open*.

Although "being raised by White people" entailed both gains and losses, it often left participants to feel disconnected from racial "knowledge of themselves" and "set up" to expect a colorblind

experience of race that their stigmatized racial appearances prevented them from accessing. The fact that most explained their migrations away from home as a search for racially diverse communities (as opposed to seeking economic opportunity) suggests they believed their predominantly White hometowns constrained their development as Black multiracial persons. As Steven poignantly explained, “I felt if I stayed I would have died on a certain level.”

Life on the Outside: Managing Societal Perceptions of Multiraciality and Transracial Adoption

But I remember there was one girl named Ebony and she could not BELIEVE I had been adopted by White people. She was like, “WOW! You were adopted by White people?! Are they nice to you? Do they treat you well?” And that was a shock to me ... because that was the first time I realized that Black people might not get treated well by White people. I was teased by White people, but at the same time I had White people sticking up for me. You know? I didn’t feel like ALL of them were against me.” (Justine, 28)

I was in my salon and I didn’t even know what a hot comb was. That was *my* giveaway! And he [the stylist] was like, “Were you raised by *White* people?” And then, he was like, “OH ... I was able to tell that by the way you talked and by the way you carried yourself.” (Crystal, 24)

Participants were well aware of the politics associated with transracial adoption, including the National Association of Black Social Workers’s (1972) position statement. Additionally, participants had all witnessed public controversies over the “horrors of transracial adoption,” featuring traumatized adults on *Oprah*, in movies, and in other public forums. It is not surprising, therefore, that participants were exceptionally conscious of these negative constructions of their families and, ultimately, of themselves. Most deliberately sought out experiences with Black peers or in a Black community at different times in their lives ($n = 22$); all discussed how their White parents and Black-White heritages operated as markers of “whiteness,” becoming liabilities in their acceptance as legitimate members of a Black community. Here, Crystal notes this added stigma of having a racially ambiguous appearance *and* having two White parents as threatening one’s Black racial legitimacy: “Especially when you’re

walking around in the street—your child, as far as appearance, is going to be judged *twice* as hard by the Black community when they see you’re also with White parents.”

But in their adulthoods, they were not always *with* their White parents. Consequently, their statuses as transracially adopted were often “hidden.” This provided uncensored insight into how some Black peers viewed others like themselves. Like Rene, this placed them in a position to disclose and defend (or not) that they had been “raised by White people”:

In college, there were some students ... that it was just NOT acceptable to. I remember ... there was this big debate about this. I got into this huge argument in the lounge. It was a whole group of us and it was like: “*THAT’S* not okay ... there’s something wrong with that. There’s *no way* that they could raise ...” I just listened for the longest time. Then I said, “Well—how do you think I turned out?” You know? And I was VERY ANGRY. It just makes me feel like, *you just don’t know*. You don’t know! For so long I always thought there was something wrong with *me*. Like I have to even [pause] just having to explain where I’m coming from. I’m just a person. Regardless of who raised me, this is ME. There’s nothing wrong with ME just because I was raised in this fashion.

Although most felt comfortable sharing their transracial adoptive backgrounds as adults, some described the importance of disclosing both stigmatized identities early on to avoid moments like Rene’s or discomfort in friendships with Black peers. Marcia explains:

I often tell people up front, “I’m biracial and transracially adopted.” I think part of it has been people have found out later and said, “Why haven’t you *told* me this?” It’s often something that people find out pretty early on about me. Which maybe helps explain to people why I speak the way I do, why I look [and] act the way I do. And who I *am*. So instead of them saying, “Oh, she’s stuck up. —She’s biracial? Okay.” “Her parents are both White? *THAT’S* why she talks like a White girl!” So I think sometimes it defuses the situation. They’re like, “Oh she’s not *trying* to be something, she IS this thing.” So there’s kind of this dilemma as to—do you say anything? Because I don’t want there to be any secrets, I don’t want there to be any surprises—I am who I am.... Deal with it!

Jeff, age 25, grew up in a family of six with two other transracially adopted siblings in a small East Coast college town. He also states that telling people about his multiracial heritage and his transracial adoption helps to limit or diffuse

conflict when his racial appearance does not match his behaviors: "I accepted the fact that I will never truly be perceived as a 'true' Black person and that I will always feel some animosity from 'real' Black people. However, once they understand that I am only half Black and adopted, I get the 'Ah!' like they understand that it is not my fault."

Others, however, deliberate more in navigating this situation, realizing there are social consequences for them in sharing this information. Below is an excerpt from an interview with Justine. Like the quotes above, it underscores an awareness of the stigma of having White parents and the logic that fuels it. It also illustrates the power of folk theories of race that position blackness and whiteness as mutually exclusive, opposing identities. This had real consequences for participants who felt pressures, into adulthood, to reveal both their many ties to whiteness and their many disconnections from blackness in a framework outside of "passing":

I'm definitely a little bit nervous when I meet Black people. I'm afraid this ... person may not like me once they find out that I wasn't raised by Black people or by one Black parent and one White parent. It's like this fear that I have, that they're going to be like, "She's not really Black enough." It makes me feel like I'm a *traitor*—like somebody might *think* I'm a traitor. I find myself ... trying to tell somebody early on ... slip it in ... that I was adopted by White people. So they have a chance to get out of becoming friends with me.... So, when I meet a Black person, sometimes they may be thinking, she's light-skinned Black or maybe interracial, but they are probably not thinking I was adopted by White people. They probably are thinking, *she knows what it's like to be Black, to have grown up with a Black parent*. And I don't. So, I feel like I want to let them know that *before* they might share something with me that then when they find out—"OH WAIT! SHE'S NOT!" I don't want to offend somebody.

Justine's use of the term *traitor* reflects the constructions of blackness and whiteness as two groups and identities that are perceived incompatible and therefore expected to remain socially and personally separate. Under the one-drop rule, being a person with even partial Black descent without any familial tie to blackness via at least one Black parent causes a "crisis in racial meaning" (Omi & Winant, 1994) and suspicions about the person's perceived whiteness as a personal choice to reject blackness. In sharing their adoptive and multiracial

backgrounds, some participants believed they could subvert these suspicions that they were "passing" into whiteness. As Jeff stated earlier, it was not their fault and not of their choosing that they failed to remain within the borders of blackness (Dalmage, 2000) or that their racial appearances were deceiving of their authentic identities—who they "really are." In other words, they were not "passing" out of an existing Black family and community but rather were multiracial and were *adopted* out of blackness into whiteness.

The decisions made by participants to share or conceal who they "really" were varied, however. A few said they did not share this family background unless they were specifically asked ($n = 3$). Most others, however, used it to test new friends or partners to see their honest reaction to their families. When people reacted negatively, they were no longer considered close friends or as ideal partners. Lauren explains: "I wanted to see their ... HONEST reaction. If it was going to be a problem. And you would see people ... come into the house and kinda go, 'Oh!?'—the look on their face—it really wasn't a serious relationship from then on out."

Additional factors entered into how participants viewed themselves in relationship to another group to which they were assumed to be similar. Black-White multiraciality, as discussed earlier, can also be stigmatizing. Some understood their adoption as providing an escape from stereotypes and racialized identity politics levied at multiracials and interracial couples. One stereotype in particular, the assumption that all multiracial people are racially and psychologically confused, was mentioned and refuted in all the interviews. Lara begins to articulate this in her sense of relief growing up that she was transracially adopted, and that this allowed her to escape the social pathologizing of multiracial people and interracial families:

As a kid I'd say, "Oh, I'm so glad my parents are *both* White, than to have one of *each*." I thought people would think it was worse. I saw other kids ... have one of each and ... think—*they* have PROBLEMS. [Then with excitement] I don't have any, I'm so glad! I thought people could quickly recognize *THEY* have problems. As a kid, I thought it would be *HORRIBLE* to walk around with one of *each*.

Lara's construction of transracial adoption and multiraciality is perhaps facilitated by her darker complexion and protected by her strong

disinterest in pursuing a search. Yet others of various complexions and search interest levels also made similar distinctions between multiracial people like themselves as transracially adopted and others who were “not adopted.” Although Lara is the only one who clearly articulates her understanding of being adopted as not only different but perhaps easier, being transracially adopted offered many explanations for why participants believed they were different from others assumed to be racially similar.

Ultimately, their stories of race and family held many layers of complexity. Their understandings of race and adoption were inseparable from experiencing race as multiracial individuals growing up in White adoptive families. These were lifetime identities. The few participants who felt their parents were helpful ($n = 5$) saw them as joining on a journey, challenging themselves to see the world through their child’s multiracial eyes. This reduced participants’ felt disconnection even into adulthood. Like Lauren, parents were viewed as supportive when they were present in their child’s racialized world across the life course:

‘Cause you know people still want to know what it’s like being mixed in this world. And people STILL want to know what it’s like being raised by White people. But you know what? I didn’t need my parents to identify with me on how it felt to be called a n—r. All I needed to know is that they were *there* for me. That when I hurt, it *did* hurt them. They may not understand, but it did hurt them. And that’s what they [children] need.

DISCUSSION

There are some limitations to this study that bear noting. First, this study privileges the participants’ perspectives. Future research must include family-based longitudinal designs that represent greater class diversity, drawing on the perspectives of all family members involved in the adoptive experience over the life course (Frasch & Brooks, 2003). Also, recruiting families who transracially adopt from foster care, typically subsidized adoptions, may yield more class-balanced samples. Second, this study’s findings are shaped by the fact that participants were adopted as infants during a time of closed adoption records. Their experiences embedded in lacking racial resemblance may be less salient among the growing number of children who, through

open adoption, have access to pictures of and relationships with their biological parents and potentially, siblings. Likewise, the Internet and multiracial organizations can offer multiracials new routes to relationships with others who share a racial experience and appearance. Third, this study is bound by a specific moment in adoption history. Public and private agencies now strongly encourage adoptive parent training, a resource these parents often lacked. Still, findings suggest that trainings must extend beyond awareness education. Even when parents intellectually appreciated the central role of the Black community for racial socialization, participants felt parents were not always successful in effectively or consistently implementing this knowledge. Future research must also branch out to explore the experiences of adopted multiracials who grow up within Black or interracial family systems, as well as family units with adopted children representing myriad racial-ethnic origins. Little is known about racial socialization processes within these families. Finally, this study represents a small sample. Findings will be contextualized within adoption research and multiracial literature for comparison. Ultimately, this discussion focuses on understanding the potentially distinct and shared racial socialization needs among persons who are both transracially adopted and multiracial.

It is important to consider how adoption—simply being disconnected from those from whom our physical and personal traits are inherited—can foster a core sense of difference (Lifton, 1995). In her research on White intracially adopted adults, March (1995, 2000) found respondents still struggled with an absence of looking like others and experienced severe rejection from extended family members because they were not “really” family (March, 1995). The status “adoptee” symbolized losses and stigmas and inspired searching for birth parents to gain an understanding of one’s physical self as shared, normalized within a biological kinship network. Findings from this study suggest that being adopted transracially, in a world that places race as a master status, can exaggerate and racialize adoption stigma, intrafamilial rejection, and alienation and also inspire the added desire to gain an understanding of one’s *racialized* physical self as shared, normalized within a racial-ethnic community. Yet achieving racial normalcy through shared racial appearance and experience was inherently complicated for

participants. First, White families are not the assumed normative context of development for children of color; participants faced stigma because they were “raised by White people.” Second, being racially mixed meant they also embodied a racially different status. Multiracial research indicates that even nonadopted multiracial children have different racial appearances and experiences than biological parents as well as biological siblings (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005). This racial discordance causes many multiracials to feel racially “unique” at home, at school, and within their parents’ single-race communities (Samuels, 2006). Taken together, participants’ dual status as multiracial and transracially adopted seemed to mutually reinforce a sense of one’s self as highly racialized and incessantly unique—“to always feel different.” Findings from this study unsettle parental narratives of race as less salient for multiracials and instead suggest being multiracial and transracially adopted creates a developmental context that is unrelentingly racialized.

Although parental beliefs that race is less salient for multiracials may place these children at risk for colorblind socialization strategies that deemphasize race, reports of parental colorblindness may also reflect a White parent’s individual racial experience or worldview. Indeed, research on international adoptive families of Asian and Latino/a children, in particular, suggest White adoptive parents of nonmultiracial children are also positively inclined toward colorblind philosophies and parenting strategies that deemphasize race (Feigelman, 2000; Lee, 2003; Quiroz, 2007; Steinberg & Hall, 2000). In her book *Beyond Good Intentions: A Mother Reflects on Raising Internationally Adopted Children*, Register (1990) lists *believing race doesn’t matter* as one of the “ten pitfalls” of well-intentioned White adoptive parents (p. 6). Critical race scholars have examined the unique social constructions of whiteness that foster a phenomenological experience of it as racially “normal” or even as race-free (Frankenberg, 1997). Colorblindness becomes an alluring personal strategy to subvert racism by a commitment to not see racialized differences, normalizing all persons through *seeing people as people* (Frankenberg; Omi & Winant, 1994). But respondents described parental colorblindness as having the opposite effect, causing them to feel racially alienated with an unavoidable experience of racial stigma that was invalidated by parents. Participants’

migration to racially diverse cities is a form of searching common among transracially adopted adults raised in predominantly White contexts, who travel across the globe seeking racial-ethnic kinship (Trenka et al., 2006). Yet participants’ critiques of parental colorblindness did not require their parents to *be* Black or multiracial but, rather, to acknowledge their children were and, as such, had needs related to these differences. Thus, raising children with a sense of racial normalcy may require color-conscious, not colorblind, parenting, expanding beyond one’s own experience of race to include the insights of others who do share the child’s racialized status and experience. Racial-ethnic communities not only provide an important reference group for parents and children but allow for the performance and experience of one’s racialized self in positive ways that counter stigma and facilitate a mutual sense of belonging and affirmation (Spencer et al., 1997). Without this early contact, participants’ experience of their Black heritage was negatively restricted to the racism it recruited in White contexts. Findings also suggest that countering racialized stigma and alienation may require parental racial socialization that positively recognizes intrafamilial diversity *and* access to others who might offer children a sense of their racialized self as shared and valued (Jackson, 2008).

Yet findings indicate that White adoptive parents required nuanced understandings of race to racially socialize their children in ways that might be distinct from nonmultiracial groups. In addition to preparing children to cope with racism, a central tenet of racial socialization, parents must also anticipate the ways in which their child’s whiteness may be stigmatized in the Black community. Findings related to navigating stigmas attached to transracial adoption and multiraciality expand the notion of “racial bias” in racial socialization theories (McHale et al., 2006) beyond a Eurocentric context to recognize racial bias toward whiteness within communities of color that have formed as self-protective responses to counter internalized racism and stigma (Ifekwunigwe, 2004). In this case, participants navigated real and anticipated stigma attached to their White family memberships as well as to their multiraciality (e.g., half-breed). Participants noted that both their multiracial and transracial adoptive backgrounds triggered racial litmus tests (not being “Black enough”) and their need to explain they were not racial “traitors” passing

as Whites. Although findings reinforce the historical reality that multiracial persons do find important sources of kinship and belonging in the Black community, findings also reinforce the historical reality that having ties to whiteness complicates one's perceived racial allegiance and acceptance as Black (Samuels, 2006). In pursuing this "multiracial socialization," White parents must become racially sophisticated about these in-group racial dynamics. They consumed a substantial portion of identity work that participants typically navigated alone into their 30s.

Finally, two groups that may provide insight to these racial nuances, on the basis of lived experience, are other transracially adopted and multiracial persons (Jackson, 2008; Miranda, 2004). Increasingly, transracially adopted adults and multiracial adults are forming communities and organizations that are intended to serve as protective communities of shared racial experience, offering insight to cope with stigmas faced by mixed race persons and families (Jackson). The emergence of diasporic identities as "transracial adoptee" (Trenka et al., 2006, p. 2) and "multiracial" underscores the profound influence this experience of family and race has in shaping a distinct collective identity. Interestingly, the broader transracial adoption community is often included as insiders to multiracial organizations and forums because they share this family-based experience of mixed race (e.g., MAVIN foundation). Ideally, today's adopted multiracials have many more routes for connecting to these groups of shared racial experience. Building relationships for children within these communities is important, not because all people must claim or find membership within these racial-ethnic groups but because adults and peers from these communities represent additional sources of support, kinship, and affirmation. A child's abilities to "choose" racial identities, an assumed benefit of multiraciality even within structural constraints, rests on earlier opportunities to learn how to navigate the shifting meaning of one's racialized status within these groups. Being multiracial and transracially adopted presented a highly racialized world for participants with few automatic routes to access a shared racial experience. Findings suggest parents can play a crucial role in providing opportunities for their children to experience their multiracial family systems and heritages as both unique and shared.

NOTE

I first acknowledge and thank the participants in this study. Their willingness to share their stories candidly provided crucial insights to understanding identity work among those who are both multiracial and transracially adopted. I also thank Leah Arndt, my colleague, for her assistance throughout the interview and analytic process. This paper uses data from interviews conducted as part of the national study, Representations of Race and Culture in the Identities of Adult Mixed Race Transracial Adoptees, funded through the Heller Research Award.

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