

Building Kinship and Community: Relational Processes of Bicultural Identity Among Adult Multiracial Adoptees

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This study uses the case of transracially adopted multiracial adults to highlight an alternative family context and thus process of African American enculturation. Interpretive analyses of interviews with 25 adult multiracial adoptees produced 4 patterns in their bicultural identity formation: (1) claiming whiteness culturally but not racially, (2) learning to “be Black”—peers as agents of enculturation, (3) biological pathways to authentic Black kinship, and (4) bicultural kinship beyond Black and White. Conceptualizing race as an ascribed extended kinship network and using notions of “groundedness” from bicultural identity literature, the relational aspects of participants’ identity development are highlighted. Culturally relevant concepts of bicultural identity are proposed for practice with multiracial adoptees who have multiple cultures of origin and for whom White mainstream culture is transmitted intrafamilially as a first culture.

Keywords: Bicultural Socialization; Cultural Groundedness; Enculturation; Multiracial; Racial Identity; Transracial Adoption

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Adoption seeks to provide children with what has historically been one of the most fundamental characteristics of the human experience and the context in which cultural identities are first acquired—a family. When boundaries of race are crossed in this process, adoptions are referred to as “transracial.” Discourse and research on domestic transracial adoption have traditionally focused on White parents adopting African American children.

Given U.S. constructions of race and blackness under the one-drop rule, it is not surprising that children with Black-White heritage exist within transracial adoption research on Black children. However, in these studies this group not only exists but typically dominates, making up 70–95% of most sample populations (Miranda, 2004). Scholars speculate that children with Black-White heritage historically have been, and

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continue to be, the group most likely to be transracially adopted in both the United States and the United Kingdom (Miranda, 2004; Thoburn, Norford, & Rashid, 2000). This study responds to calls for culturally relevant approaches to transracial adoption research in general (Frasch & Brooks, 2003; Lee, 2003) and to theorizing factors related to identity development in ways that are specifically relevant to this hidden group of transracial adoptees (Folaron & Hess, 1993; Hollingsworth, 1997).

Despite the unyielding centrality of race and culture in the debates surrounding transracial adoption practice, in research, race and culture have not been considered central to evaluating outcomes as successful (Hollingsworth, 1997; Lee, 2003). Instead, processes of acculturation—adoptees' adjustment and assimilation into White adoptive families and mainstream contexts—predominate (Miranda, 2004; Shiao & Tuan, 2008). Consequently, when adoptees "correctly" claim a racial category that matches that of their biological parents, such responses are interpreted as successful racial *and* cultural identity outcomes (Miranda, 2004). This pattern of findings and conflation of race with culture in past research has caused some scholars to refute that transracial adoption is linked to distinct challenges in identity formation, occasionally rejecting the notion that relationships with persons who share an ethnicity are key to processes of identity formation. As Vroegh (1997) concludes after finding the Black and biracial adoptees in her study claimed Black and biracial labels, "No evidence was found . . . that everyday relationships with black people are key to the development of a black racial identity" (p. 574). While these findings indicate the ability of transracial adoptees to acquire mainstream culture and, therefore, use racial labels, they do not shed light on adoptees' *bicultural* social development outside of predominantly White contexts, and specifically within their cultures of origin.

Some scholars now assert that these contexts are equally central for evaluating developmental outcomes and defining success among transracial adoptees (Shiao & Tuan, 2008; Trenka, Oparah, & Shin, 2006). Such an analysis requires not only theorizing identity development beyond racial labels, but requires methods that engage transracial adoptee perspectives on their own identity development processes. This study's use of an interpretive method to elicit adoptees' perspectives on their bicultural, and specifically African American, enculturation processes addresses this need in the literature.

Examining enculturation processes among multiracial adoptees is also important because serious deficits have been identified in working with multiracial families and children in child welfare practice (Folaron & Hess, 1993; Miranda, 2004). These problems include professionals' discomfort or lack of skill in discussing issues tied to prejudice within White birth families—a factor that can lead to abuse, neglect, and the "voluntary" surrender of multiracial children into foster care (Folaron & Hess, 1993; Patton, 2000). Likewise, as bicultural identities are consistently reported as protective factors for children of color (Garcia Coll et al., 1996), it is important to understand what facilitates or complicates the acquisition of this developmental competency in this group of children. It is also important because current adoption legislation (i.e., MEPA/IEPA, PL 104-188, 1996) outlaws the use of race or culture in adoption placement decisions.

Though intended to eliminate same-race preferences in adoption and thus reduce the time Black children languish in foster care, some suggest these policies have constrained the abilities of professionals to prepare adopters for culturally attuned parenting (Smith, McRoy, Freundlich, & Kroll, 2008). In fact, in 2004 an Ohio agency was sued for US\$1.8 million for discrimination when a social worker asked a White

couple to develop a plan for how they would foster the cultural identity of their transracially adopted child (USDHHS, 2006). Although findings clearly suggest transracial adoption need not be synonymous with cultural genocide, the analysis underscores how participants' enculturation within predominantly African American contexts was complicated by their multiraciality and their initial and sometimes exclusive acculturation within White contexts as young children. Findings are used to highlight the need for policy and practice methods that support professionals and parents in providing early and ongoing opportunities within and external to the family system for ethnic exploration.

In the study of race, culture, and identity, researchers are faced with the challenge of using a highly flawed lexicon to measure, analyze, and describe key processes and outcomes. In this paper, the term *racialized* is used to underscore that race is a social, not biological, category assigned to human beings by visually assessing (i.e., racializing) one's phenotypes. Similarly, the label *multiracial* is increasingly used in the literature, and is used here, as an umbrella term inclusive of all mixed race populations (Dalmage, 2004; Root & Kelly, 2003). Terms like "biracial" can easily reify the belief that genetically "pure" racial groups exist and that, through intimate liaisons, they create racially mixed offspring whose heritages are then identified in racial fractions (Spencer, 2000).

This study uses a conceptualization of culture and identity that builds upon the interpretive and theoretical work of Collier and Thomas (1988) and multiracial scholars (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005) who conceptualize both as multidimensional and fluid. A cultural identity is not inherited, but acquired and performed through interactions within one's family and broader environment. Thus one's cultural identity may be different than one's racial identity. This analysis focuses on processes of *enculturation*, defined as the acquisition of cultural memberships and grounding within a racial-ethnic minority group (Park, 2007). Findings are used to rework traditional conceptualizations of enculturation for relevance to multiracial persons who have multiple *cultures of origin*, and for whom mainstream culture is often transmitted intrafamilially as a first culture. The concept of "groundedness" within bicultural identity literature (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993) and the idea of race as an *extended kinship network* (DaCosta, 2004) are used to highlight the relational complexities of identity development reported by participants in this study.

METHOD

This paper uses findings drawn from a larger extended case method (ECM) study (Burawoy, 1998), examining broad experiences related to race, culture, and identity among 25 adults with Black-White racial heritage adopted by White parents (Samuels, 2009a). The ECM is used to study phenomena that lie outside of current theory. As an interpretive method, it uses a "unique case" to extend theory. In this study, bicultural identity theory has ignored transracial adoption as a unique familial context of development. Although previous adoption research has included multiracial children, their treatment as indistinguishable from nonmultiracial children makes them a hidden population. This provides a *unique case* to consider the transmission of culture and acquisition of biculturalism. Multiracial adoptees have dual racial and cultural heritage, but as transracial adoptees may not have equal access to both of their cultural communities of origin.

The larger ECM study produced three broad patterns of identity work among the participants: (1) "being raised by white people"—navigating racial difference, (2)

searching for kinship and community, and (3) expressing and claiming identities. Here I report on the second set of these findings: searching for kinship and community. These findings illustrate how participants' identity work, similar to other racialized groups, extended beyond individually selecting a racial label. It included relationally based processes within and external to their adoptive family systems.

Sample and Data Collection

The study of multiracial people and transracially adopted persons is complicated by the fact that they are regionally dispersed. Multiracial people and adoptive families do not reside in concentrated locations where researchers can proceed with naturalistic observation. All multiracial people do not identify as multiracial. This study, therefore, employed the use of several methods to obtain the sample, including (1) print and Web-based advertisements across the United States to African American, multiracial, and transracial adoption organizations and agencies, (2) advertisements in conference brochures, magazines, mailings to college student groups, and adoption networks, and (3) word of mouth. An audit trail revealed an even clustering across paper and Internet advertisements ($n = 9$), encouragement to participate from family and friends ($n = 10$), and snowball referrals ($n = 6$). Inclusion criteria were Black-White heritage, White adoptive parents, and a minimum age of 18.

Participants completed audiotaped, in-depth interviews 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. Within quoted text, italics are used as the standard indicator of emphasis and capitalized letters to note increased volume (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984). Participants were assigned pseudonyms.

Interviews began by exploring participants' adoption stories, what they knew about their birth parents, how they were raised to think about race, culture, and transracial adoption, and how these identities changed (or not) over time. In describing the communities of their childhoods, all were asked about experiences with racism and prejudice inside or external to their family systems. Of particular relevance to this analysis were their stories of how and why they built racial and cultural connections beyond their adoptive families through friendships, travel, college, and searching for biological parents. Throughout data collection, a research group was used to debrief and critique the interviews in both process and content (Shek, Tang, & Han, 2005). Their perspectives and critiques deeply informed and strengthened the interview process and ultimately, the analysis of findings.

Analysis

The analysis was guided by an interpretive ECM approach (see Sullivan, 2002). Several established methods were used to enhance rigor and credibility, including multiple coders, audit trails, member checks, and critical case analyses (Shek et al., 2005). The first five interviews were inductively "open coded" by four research team members; transcripts were read without a start list of codes. One member of this team continued as a research assistant. Through multiple reads of the transcripts using the Grounded Theory technique of constant comparison, a final coding scheme was developed (Charmaz, 2006). This process included searching for disconfirming evidence, conducting member checks and follow-up interviews with participants

whose experiences challenged or added complexity to the analysis. We refined, changed, and omitted codes accordingly. All transcripts were then double coded.

For an ECM study, however, theories (e.g., biculturalism) are reworked using multisystemic analyses of data from the field. This requires pushing the data beyond descriptive themes by using questions to expose how broader contextual factors potentially shape individual patterns of experience (see Sullivan, 2002). In this study such questions included: How is their sense of identity and belonging within a Black reference group complicated or facilitated by monocentric constructions of race and family? How do societal constructions of race as an extended kin network shape one's acceptance into a given racial or cultural group? How do parental socialization practices facilitate or constrain their access to a Black reference group with peers? In using these questions to guide analyses, findings suggested that this group was caught in a web of expectations and norms that rarely reflected their lived experience or identities. Four patterns shaped their navigation of these social meanings of race and kinship: (1) claiming whiteness culturally but not racially, (2) learning to "be Black"—peers as agents of enculturation, (3) biological pathways to an authentic Black kinship, and (4) bicultural kinship beyond Black and White. As the stories presented in this study suggest, there are many pathways for adoptees to establish a sense of kinship in communities including, but beyond, that of one's biological or adoptive families.

About the Participants

Most participants grew up in communities that were described as middle- to upper-middle class and predominantly or exclusively White ($n = 22$). Three grew up in unincorporated rural areas (e.g., in farming communities). Most were female ($n = 16$), had either completed college ($n = 19$) or were currently enrolled ($n = 4$), and all were adopted as infants by married couples. Their ages clustered around two groupings, 19–25 ($n = 11$) and 26–32 ($n = 14$). Many reported that they were the only transracially adopted child in their adoptive families ($n = 16$). Similar to other studies involving mixed race participants (Patton, 2000), almost half of the sample reported that they were voluntarily surrendered for adoption by their White mothers because of their Black heritage ($n = 12$). All participants' biological mothers were White and biological fathers were Black.

Most ($n = 23$) labeled their parents' socialization approaches as "colorblind," a common philosophy reported in adoption literature involving multiracials (McRoy & Zurcher, 1983; Patton, 2000). However, not all parents fully disregarded their child's racial or cultural heritage. Instead, 10 of these 23 participants reported receiving African American books and dolls ($n = 10$), occasionally attending African American churches ($n = 2$), and/or attending racially diverse high schools ($n = 6$). Among all participants, only 2 indicated Black cultural immersion experiences in their early childhoods.

Participants noted numerous advantages of transracial adoption and being culturally immersed as young children within "mainstream culture"—advantages marking this competence for racial-ethnic minorities as essential to successfully navigating predominantly White contexts and institutions (LaFromboise et al., 1993). All believed their comfort with what they called "white mainstream culture" benefited them professionally and interpersonally with White coworkers. However, participants indicated that they lacked similar cultural immersion as young children in predominantly Black contexts. This disadvantaged their comfort in relating to, and

be accepted by, African Americans. Like Liam, some believed they would never find this racialized kinship ($n = 3$). By eighth grade Liam resolved that his atypical experience of race and family rendered him irrevocably different. Though he still admits to a lingering hope for a collective experience of his racial identity, he labels his desire for it, perhaps self-protectively, as a “delusion”:

I . . . imagined myself as a black person who just . . . was in the wrong place . . . meaning in a white environment. . . . In eighth grade, I just gave up. Up until that . . . I had a . . . delusion . . . I *still* have a delusion . . . that there’s a generally welcoming community based on race. And that, you know if you sort of follow along and do the right things . . . folks will treat [you] normal. . . . I decided that was never going to be *my* life.

However, although most participants reported similar feelings of incessant racial difference, most also continued to seek membership in a “welcoming community” through friendships, travel, and searching for their Black biological families. Some did not find this until early adulthood; others were still searching for it at the time of our interviews. Shared among all, however, were their starting places growing up multi-racial within a White familial and cultural context.

RESULTS

Claiming Whiteness Culturally But Not Racially: Constructions of Race, Culture, and Identity

I’m treated like a black person in America . . . but I’ve been taught by two white parents. They’re . . . conflicting in a way. It’s hard to articulate. ‘Cause I know if I was born and raised by two white people, I couldn’t be whiter. (Andy)

For most participants their cultural socialization within predominantly White contexts, yet enduring experiences with racism, often resulted in differences between their *racial* versus their *cultural* identifications. Despite their White family memberships and White heritages, all reported being “treated like a black person in America.” Thus, they experienced racism in their predominantly White neighborhoods and schools, and some ($n = 10$) within their family systems. This was a central factor in not claiming White racial identities. Yet *culturally*, all identified with whiteness. They were raised by White parents and were immersed in predominantly White contexts throughout their childhoods. Here, Marcia explains how this can cause differences between one’s cultural identification and one’s racial sense of self:

I call myself biracial today. There’s times when I say black. I don’t ever call myself white. . . . Culturally, I cannot say I’m black. Culturally, I was raised in a white community and culturally . . . I identify more with the white community. . . . [But] I’m a black woman on the street . . . I know what it’s like to be followed in Walgreens.

Like Marcia and Andy, participants’ early understanding of blackness was as a heritage and appearance that recruited racism in predominantly White contexts. This quickly facilitated their racial identification as Black or biracial—not White. But these experiences did little to facilitate their *cultural* identification with a Black reference group. Though 10 participants acknowledged parental efforts to provide African

American books and dolls, or to attend African American cultural events, many continued to desire a racial kinship—relationships to ground the racial labels they claimed. Rene believed this was acquired informally and intrafamilially as “natural knowledge, things you come up with.” In her view, the books and dolls her parents provided remained disconnected from the communities and people she felt embodied that part of her heritage:

I grew up [with] my parents letting me know . . . I was black. Trying to do things . . . dolls, books, anything to expose me to . . . what their idea of my culture was. But still not really having any understanding . . . culturally of what it MEANS to be African American, of mixed race . . . I was just searching, seeking out . . . I was looking for not just a friend, but almost like . . . *kinship* with someone. *Someone* . . . more like me. And . . . maybe just being . . . around this person I could get some sense of who I am.

Andria, who was raised in a small Midwestern college town, also explains the distinction between book knowledge and more relational methods of acquiring an identity. Despite the efforts made by her mother, the imbalance between her White and Black cultural socialization experiences left her feeling that she “grew up white.” She explains that she is now in her early adulthood committing herself to predominantly Black friendships, dating partners, and social settings as a corrective identity: “I’m relearning that . . . now . . . in college. My mom got me booklets you know? Stories . . . little things I read here and there. But . . . you can’t get your heritage that way. For 18 years, I grew up white . . . for the next 18, I’m going to be black.”

Unlike the participants above, Lauren was one of three who noted her childhood family context as “bicultural.” She believes this required the immersion of all family members:

I know about the white culture, because that’s what I was IN. . . . Had I been raised in the black culture, I probably would have known a lot more. . . . But in order to know . . . I had to be immersed. . . . My parents didn’t take me outside . . . African American culture. They didn’t stick me completely in it . . . and leave me either. They were there with me, and we would talk through things . . . and we ALL learned things.

However, most participants believed that their families and neighborhoods lacked access to the level of cultural immersion Lauren describes. In fact, among the 22 adoptees who grew up in predominantly White communities, only 2 remained as adults. Andy explains that, for him, these changes in context brought first-time opportunities for cultural immersion, experiences for which he had longed even in his racially diverse school and suburb:

It was priceless . . . it was what I always wanted and never had . . . when I was a kid . . . to be *submerged* in black people—where a white person would be the minority. And it was just . . . nice. It filled that gap and that question that I always had. (And what was that question?) What it felt like, you know? It was assuring and peaceful. That was one of the best things I came out of college with.

Although all discussed cultural immersion as central to their identity work, they also explained that building these relationships was not always easy and their acceptance as Black was rarely automatic. Being multiracial and raised within a White

family affected how Black peers related to participants as cultural insiders or outsiders. As Sheri describes, a cultural socialization within predominantly White contexts has ripple effects: “Black people accepted me openly until they found out my family was white and how that affected *everything else* about me. I didn’t have the same taste in movies . . . in music. Didn’t get the same jokes. . . . That was a nightmare!” The following section explores how participants’ lack of bicultural socialization and multiraciality complicated processes of connecting to, and being accepted by, Black peers.

Learning to “Be Black”: Peers as Agents of Enculturation

After . . . high school, I worked . . . at a camp for inner city kids [with] a lot of black counselors. I was like, *oh great, I’m going to finally get to meet some black people!* It was very awkward . . . they saw me and were like, “What are you doing!?! What are you?” I said I was interracial. And they said, “No, you’re not. . . . If you’re part black, you’re black. Start acting like it.” And I was like, *ACTING like it?* I’m just acting like who I AM. (Justine)

“What are you?” is the hallmark question asked of all multiracial persons (Dalmage, 2004). Thus, participants routinely responded to incessant prodding to claim, and perform, single-race identities. In the United States, racial-ethnic labels are believed to signify not only a personal identity, but a single group membership. Indeed one’s racial-ethnic group is considered one’s “family writ large” (Cornell, 1996, p. 269)—an extended kin network linked through shared racial and cultural origins. The belief in race as an extended kinship group facilitates social expectations that persons within a group should identify and behave similarly, and should relate to each other in family-like ways (see DaCosta, 2004). The “race as kinship” narrative coupled with monocentric ideas of race facilitates the pathologizing of multiracial identities as contemporary forms of “passing,” and multiracial people as “racial traitors.” This affirms the historical reality that despite multiracial heritage, one cannot lay claim to membership within two racial families (DaCosta, 2004). Despite postmodern critiques against essentialized or homogenous concepts of race, participants experienced a world that believed “White” and “Black” were mutually exclusive group memberships (Favor, 1999; Ifekwunigwe, 2004). Appearing racially ambiguous, using multiracial identity labels (e.g., interracial), “acting white” (Ogbu, 2004), and having White parents significantly compromised their abilities to be accepted fully as an insider member (i.e., kin) to blackness. As Steven explains:

I always felt with a lot of black people, I wasn’t accepted because people thought I was trying to act white. And I had a lot of issues with that for a long time. I wished that I could speak a certain way. And I hated the fact that I didn’t have the right way of walking and way of dressing. I felt like I wasn’t accepted. . . . Even still to this day . . . I have that a little bit. That people looked at me like . . . I was a sell out because I didn’t speak black enough.

Some, like Marcia, believed these group dynamics were particularly salient in dating experiences, “I feel like I’ve got this obligation from this group I wasn’t even *raised* with, that doesn’t fully accept me—to date black. . . . And when I *do* date [black men] *then* I feel like I’m almost not black enough.”

Yet their stories about how people discerned their authentic group memberships varied across contexts and shifted between paying attention to racial versus cultural

factors. For example, White friends or even family would admit to seeing participants as *culturally* familiar (i.e., familial) and thus not “really black,” or would exclaim, “Wow, sometimes we forget you’re black!” But racially, participants experienced racism rather than racial inclusion in these same families, peer groups, and communities. With Black peers, while sometimes experiencing acceptance as members racially, their behaviors often provoked constant questions regarding their cultural membership and kinship to blackness. Participants learned that membership within a group required more than one’s desire, racial heritage, or use of racial labels; it required being recognized and accepted as kin by other members of the group.

Many also learned that although their complexions were dark enough to experience racism in their White neighborhoods, in Black contexts their appearances were considered “light-skinned” and viewed as having privileges and higher social status. Lauren notes: “I learned early on . . . the difference in African American culture . . . to be light-skinned or darker-skinned. And how us light-skinned, we always think we’re *better*, and we’re *cuter*.”

Some became intent on proving that being light-skinned did not always bring an easier life. All participants acknowledged the advantages of light complexions in a Eurocentric society. Yet, some felt this was not reflective of their own experiences of race and racism having been raised within White families and communities. Crystal, who describes her family as “openly racist,” adamantly refuted misconceptions that her life was easy; that in having light skin she avoided the stigmas of blackness:

Just . . . because you’re light . . . the assumption that *your* life has been easier. What they don’t understand is that in *my family* I WAS the dark-skinned . . . child. I *LIVED* [that] life . . . gone through [that] experience! So you don’t have to take your anger out on me.

Sometimes, parents’ good intentions to send their children to racially diverse high schools were not accompanied by earlier cultural socialization to navigate these identity politics. Like Justine and Steven, they lacked knowledge about how their appearances and behaviors would be interpreted in a culturally Black context. Participants reported being teased about their hairstyles and how they talked, being called names (e.g., half breed), and told that their behaviors and, therefore, they, were not Black enough. Because many lacked culturally relevant strategies to negotiate this, in five cases these interactions escalated to physical confrontations at school. For Sheila, this was an often traumatic experience that she navigated on her own:

It takes more than . . . moving into a neighborhood. . . . Be *involved* . . . teach your kid how to *relate* . . . what it MEANS to be black. I DEFINITELY did not get that! I was sent to school to fend for myself. My parents had no idea, but that’s what it was. It was like being thrown into a cage of lions [laughs] and, *Good luck! Hope you make it out okay, if you haven’t been beat up by the end of the day.* And that leaves scars . . .

Occasionally, this racial litmus testing (Favor, 1999) led to being “chosen” or “pulled into” a Black peer group. In her book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* Tatum (1999) describes the racially segregated school cafeteria as a normative and key site for navigating racial group memberships. Brad experienced this at his high school, and initially ate alone as the only mixed-race person, “You go to the cafeteria and . . . all these people . . . break up into these groups.

I . . . just sat by myself. I spent a lot of time alone in high school.” But in college he was invited to join a group of Black female peers:

This group of black girls . . . were talking about me . . . the whole group . . . would turn around. One of the girls came over. She was like, “Hi, what’s your name? Why don’t you come over here and sit with us from now on.” So since then, I’ve had much more allies with black women, from then on.

These experiences sometimes left participants with mixed feelings about their kinship to blackness, uncertain of always finding a “welcoming community based on race.” Most learned to anticipate racialized stigmas associated with their whiteness and light complexions in Black contexts and racialized stigmas associated with their blackness in White contexts. Yet as young adults, many also desired relationships that would fully authenticate and ground their racial belonging and thus searched for a biologically derived racial kinship.

Biological Pathways to an “Authentic” Black Kinship

The absence of a socially sanctioned kinship tie to blackness had implications for the identity work of most participants. As peer relationships frequently caused them to question themselves as “black enough,” conducting a search for biological family became important to grounding their identities within a Black kinship group from which they originated and, therefore, to which they legitimately belonged. Given the centrality of “blood bonds” for establishing kinship ties and one’s sense of belonging (March, 2000) it is not surprising that, as adoptees, participants searched for biological mothers. Yet after finding them, participants still yearned for a *racial* resemblance and kinship. This often inspired the need to find biological Black fathers.

As reported in other adoption research involving multiracial adoptees (Patton, 2000), nearly half of the participants in this study successfully completed a search for both biological parents ($n = 11$) and six were searching for both at the time of our interview. An additional three were only able to locate biological mothers despite their desire to find their fathers. Only five expressed no desire to search for either birth parent. As Maureen explains, having grown up in a White family, finding her biological White mother would not provide a racialized kinship to ground her identity. Thus, she was searching for her Black father, living in Italy, “I’ve been around white people, I know that they’re like, I’ve never been around an Italian black guy. . . . I’d like to see—I’m really, really interested in him.”

Those who found their Black fathers sometimes noted a legitimizing effect on their Black identities. In fact, after finding his biological father, one participant confessed to carrying a picture of his paternal family as “proof”—confirmation of his family-based ties to African Americans. For Monika, being surrounded by her Black birth family has also been crucial to her identity work. In moving to the city where her paternal family lives, she does not exclude her White adoptive family as a source of kinship but includes her Black birth family as equally vital to grounding her identity:

I always wanted to know who I was . . . and a part of that was finding my biological roots. . . . It’s important to me that I am surrounded by this because I haven’t had that. I’m talking aunts, uncles. I’m talking family, *blood*, okay? I haven’t had this! . . . It legitimizes my blackness. It doesn’t mean that I’m now embarrassed [of] my white parents. . . . I love them,

they are my parents. But they don't understand that this was a missing vital piece for me. And I often was very envious of my black friends that had that in their homes.

Searching provided racial validation in other ways. For Sheila, finding that her White biological mother had other multiracial children and lived within a Black community was, in her words, "golden." Even after locating her Black father, the cultural connections to blackness that her White biological mother and multiracial siblings maintained were especially affirming to her emerging bicultural identity: "My [white] birth family grew up the way all these black people grew up. I mean the part in life that I missed, the part that I didn't understand—the part that I got made fun of . . . it IS in my background . . . it IS a part of me!" For Sheila, her White birth mother and multiracial siblings provided a model of how a multiracial family can live multiculturally.

Kinship Beyond Black or White: A Diasporic Hybrid Identity

But it will NEVER be 100%. When it comes down to . . . "Remember when you were a kid . . . ? And . . . living in the ghetto?!" And it's like . . . I know about it *now* . . . just from many years of hearing it over and over again But you know, I can't relate to it completely because it was *not* like that when I was a kid. (Sheila)

Like Sheila, who is now in her 30s, most believed that learning a culture outside of one's family as a second culture forever marked a childhood and, therefore, an identity. Sheila's monolithic idea of blackness tied to inner-city poverty is a stereotyped construction that even nonadopted middle-class African Americans may not share (Favor, 1999). Still, most reported feeling disconnected from these social constructions of an *authentic* blackness and thus alienated from group conversations that reminisced and bonded over shared familial experiences of blackness. Being transracially adopted and multiracial became synonymous with holding partial racial and cultural connections, and thus their cultural group memberships were perceived as ambiguous by others and sometimes, by themselves.

Although other multiracial people and transracial adoptees might have offered additional routes to a shared experience of race and family, even as adults most had never experienced a predominantly multiracial context ($n = 22$). Only six reported being involved in a social network of other transracial adoptees. In some cases ($n = 6$), participants had never met or seen anyone who was also both transracially adopted and multiracial. Of the nine who had transracially adopted siblings, only three had ever discussed race- or adoption-related issues with them. Taken together, this fostered a sense of themselves as racially and culturally different from nearly everyone they knew.

Imagining a social setting where she was both racially and culturally similar, Monika uses the language of kinship—brothers/sisters—emphasizing that she has not experienced her multiraciality as a recognizable and indisputable marker of her genuine group membership:

To have that BASE . . . where you can just have a bunch of your brothers and sisters . . . it gives you something to really then . . . identify with. Now I'm not saying, "*Let's form a new race!*" [But] you know, if I walked into that [a room of multiracial people], I don't know the surge of what I'd feel. Because that will be the very FIRST moment in my life when that's true. Where you fit *exactly*. And they'll know—they'll know.

Others found kinship through a pan-African identity discovered through international travel—a heterogeneous “blackness” inclusive of mixed heritage. Steven describes a confidence and comfort around his identity emerging as he traveled in his 30s to Brazil:

That’s when I started to realize . . . being mixed race . . . I can fit into so many different realities that I don’t have to just be black or biracial. . . . In Brazil . . . there’s a lot of mixed people. And that was my first opportunity to . . . realize that there are different ways of being black. And that being African American isn’t the end all to all. . . . That we’re the blackest of all blacks and that other black cultures don’t count. And it [traveling] just made me feel more comfortable in my own skin.

Though most ($n = 23$) found their way to relationally ground their identities, like Steven, they were still largely achieving this in their adulthoods. Most believed that their lived experiences of race, family, and identity were so unusual that explaining this to others was a never-ending interpersonal dynamic and figuring it out, a lifelong challenge. As Roger states, “I’ll be 80 . . . and I’ll still be figuring things out . . . never *really* be able to figure things out . . . never **REALLY** be able to explain it to my friends exactly.”

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations must be noted before discussing findings. First, this study represents solely adoptee perspectives on enculturation. Although this perspective remains understudied, future research should include family-based case designs to examine parental socialization processes. Transracial adoptive families can include nonadopted children, international and domestic transracial adoptees, and heritages beyond Black-White multiracial. How these parents approach cultural socialization remains unstudied. Second, this sample only includes persons adopted as infants. Biculturalism and enculturation processes may drastically differ when children are adopted through foster care, are older, and have relationships to biological family with whom they have lived before being adopted. Given increases in open adoption, feeling disconnected from one’s Black birth family may be less salient for contemporary generations of transracial adoptees. Third, multiracial children are adopted by Black families, interracial couples, and multiracial persons. These experiences have yet to be explored empirically. Likewise, this sample is heavily weighted toward females even after taking into account recent reports in U.S. Bureau of Census (2000) that indicate girls are adopted at higher rates than boys, at a ratio of 90 boys to every 100 girls in domestic adoption. Beyond obtaining gender balanced samples, future studies should also explore gendered pathways of racial and cultural identity development.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Findings illustrate that identity development extends far beyond selecting an identity label. It includes processes that are relationally based and culturally embedded. Participants explained that being told they had Black heritage, receiving books, dolls, or attending cultural festivals created, at best, superficial connections to their Black heritage. Unlike their many cultural ties to whiteness and immersion within mainstream culture, they described their African American enculturation as a delayed process of “relearning,” requiring their deliberate efforts. Interpersonal

relationships with African Americans were key to these identity processes. Lacking these relationships as children, a few resigned to never finding a racial kinship. Yet for most, building racially and culturally affirming relationships continued into adulthood through searching for Black fathers, moving to racially diverse cities, or claiming a diasporic kinship in the United States and abroad.

Findings support the growing body of scholarship that theorizes “identity” as multidimensional; a context-driven process occurring across the life course and involving structural, relational, behavioral, and personal domains (see Côté, 2006; Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005; Samuels, 2009b). Daily, participants navigated a monocentric racial structure. This facilitated contradictory appraisals by others regarding their performance of, and thus kinship to, blackness and whiteness. They routinely experienced racism despite their cultural and familial ties to whiteness, and were told they were culturally not “black enough” despite their Black or multiracial identities and heritages. Though normative to both multiracial and transracial adoptee populations (Dalmage, 2004), navigating these dynamics required a level of cultural agility which most lacked. Thus, as children, they also lacked culturally relevant ways of coping with these racialized dynamics particularly in predominantly Black contexts.

Yet beyond the need for coping skills, findings suggest participants most desired a sense of kinship—the relational domain of an identity. Therefore, findings support practice and parenting approaches that emphasize this dimension of developing a child’s bicultural identity. A relational approach can be used to highlight issues for practice with families before adoption and for identifying postadoptive supports to adoptees.

Facilitating Bicultural “Groundedness”: A Relational Approach to Transracial Adoption Practice

As defined by LaFromboise et al. (1993), biculturalism is the process of relationally grounding one’s racial identity within a cultural group. For nonadopted populations, biculturalism is considered a normative developmental goal of parenting (Berry, 2003; Garcia Coll et al., 1996; LaFromboise et al., 1993). Research consistently indicates bicultural identities are protective skills and assets, essential to the healthy development of all children of color (Berry, 2003; Garcia Coll et al., 1996; Padilla, 2006), including multiracial children (Choi, Harachi, Gilmore, & Catalano, 2006). A central dimension of a bicultural identity is achieving and maintaining “groundedness,” defined as one’s relational interdependence within a cultural group (LaFromboise et al., 1993). Through parents, children become enculturated into a broader kinship network of racial and cultural group memberships (Padilla, 2006).

Yet many White adoptive parents may lack grounding and a sense of kinship toward the racial and cultural groups from which their adoptive children originate. Findings from this study support other transracial adoption research indicating that a parent’s attachment and comfort (i.e., grounding) within a child’s racial-minority community before adoption is necessary for helping a child to also build these relationships at school and into adulthood (Johnston, Swim, Saltsman, Deater-Deckard, & Petrill, 2007; Park, 2007). Thus, a relational approach would expand beyond confronting adoptive parents about their skills to cope with racism, or teaching children *about* a culture. Relational approaches would include developing adopters’ biculturalism and helping parents relationally ground that identity before adoption. This shifts the parental and familial

identity away from “white parents with transracially adopted children” toward being a multiracial and multicultural family in both identity and cultural practice.

A relational practice approach also takes seriously the developmental context in which bicultural grounding is expected to occur. Practitioners can play an important role in developing parental awareness around the salience of neighborhood context. Findings suggest restricting early developmental contexts to predominantly White communities can create cut offs from cultural immersion experiences in predominantly Black contexts. For participants, this monocultural socialization delayed their African American enculturation, relegating it to a second culture acquired outside of their families. This negatively marked them as less than cultural kin with Black peers. Their multiracial appearances only added complexity to these processes.

Practitioners can use insights from research and literature involving transracial adoptees (Lee, 2003; Patton, 2000; Shiao & Tuan, 2008; Trenka et al., 2006) and multiracial persons (Dalmage, 2004; Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005) to build parental awareness beyond their own perspectives. Children will have early and direct access to immersion within mainstream culture through parents and society (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005). Thus a child’s bicultural social development literally depends upon parents’ deliberate and consistent efforts to maintain connections and relationships beyond predominantly White contexts (Park, 2007; Yoon, 2004). Living in diverse communities provides opportunities for the level of cultural immersion participants felt was sorely lacking in their early childhoods.

Third, it is also important for children to have opportunities to experience their communities of origin early on, and independently from their White parents. When positive, this immersion provided a temporary respite from being a racialized minority, it was described as “priceless,” “assuring,” and “peaceful.” Clinicians can help adoptive parents to appreciate that a desire for being around persons whom one physically “looks like” is not only normative (March, 2000) but is especially important for transracial adoptees who daily cope as racialized minorities in society, at school, and at home (Park, 2007; Yoon, 2004). Findings suggest children may not express this need or desire to parents directly. Clinical work with parents must underscore the importance of providing age-appropriate opportunities for immersion without leaving it up to their children to make such requests (Lee, 2003).

Certainly, families and children will differ in how biculturalism manifests. Further, a child’s temperament, developmental abilities, gender, sexuality, and other family characteristics all contribute to the diversity of a family’s approach to parenting (Frasch & Brooks, 2003; Garcia Coll et al., 1996; Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005). However, findings do suggest that clinicians must help parents to consider how they will create meaningful relationships that, in turn, can ground the family’s identity and daily life as bicultural. Choices in family residence, schools, and social networks will play key and foundational roles in either enhancing or constraining a child’s future ability to access affirming relationships and communities across the life course (Miranda, 2004).

Postadoption

Relational approaches can also inform work with adult transracial adoptees. Post-adoption practices must account for many pathways of “searching,” and the complexities embedded when relational dimensions of a bicultural identity are delayed to adulthood.

Early adulthood typically brings increased independence. For participants, this provided novel opportunities to change residence, and to seek out identity-related

experiences that were missing in their childhoods. Research suggests these findings are not unique to multiracial adoptees. Instead, searching to ground one's identity through cultural immersion can be a normative dimension of adult transracial adoptee development (Frasch & Brooks, 2003; Shiao & Tuan, 2008). Perhaps the most politically active group, Korean adult adoptees, have successfully organized legislative campaigns for dual citizenship in Korea, held national and international conferences, created professional journals, and founded community-based and on-line social networks across the globe (see Freundlich & Lieberthal, 2000; Trenka et al., 2006). Through "homeland tours" adoptee-founded organizations help Korean adoptees (and adoptive families) to ground their sense of identity through cultural immersion, birth family searches, and living permanently in Korea (Freundlich & Lieberthal, 2000; Nafzger, 2006). Yet even bilingual adoptees report navigating rejection from "native" Koreans who regard the adoptees' cultural whiteness and secondary acquisition of Korean culture as incompatible with an authentic Korean identity (Trenka et al., 2006).

Therefore, practice with adult transracial adoptees must provide supports in navigating these adult journeys "home," including grief work around feelings of cultural loss exacerbated by searching. It also requires racially sophisticated knowledge among practitioners about monocentric cultural norms and racial nuances that marginalize many transracial adoptees and multiracial persons within their own birth cultures (Nafzger, 2006; Samuels, 2009a). Likewise, participants felt affirmed by expanding their own beliefs beyond monocentric notions of an "authentic" racial or cultural identity. Clinicians can support such identity work by using identity development models that are culturally relevant to multiracial persons and families (Miranda, 2004; Rockquemore & Laszloffy 2005). There is a significant need in transracial adoption practice to use these newer models that highlight multiple pathways and outcomes of healthy identity development among multiracial persons and family systems (Frasch & Brooks, 2003; Samuels, 2009a).

Finally, being both transracially adopted and multiracial created a highly unique racialized experience. But participants sought relationships to affirm their racial similarity. Not surprisingly, adults are organizing such group-based supports for themselves and younger generations of multiracial and transracially adopted persons. Practitioners should be aware of local organizations as well as the explosion of national and international groups organized by adult multiracial people and transracial adoptees (Trenka et al., 2006). International organizations like CAL (*Chinese adoptee links*), AFAAD (*Adopted and Fostered Adults of the African Diaspora*), KAD (*Korean Adoptees*), and MAVIN (*U.S. multiracial advocacy organization*) can provide the sense that one's racial experience is indeed shared. Practitioners can support adopted adults in accessing these communities, if desired, to promote a sense of kinship that can ground their healthy adult development. The use of relational approaches would help adoptees to create meaningful and ongoing relationships within many potentially supportive communities. Yet this population's future sense of racial kinship may be additionally enhanced by the proliferation of multiracial and transracial adoptee communities with whom they are most likely to share an experience of race and family.

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