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What is This?
Counseling Families Formed by Transracial Adoption: Bridging the Gap in the Multicultural Counseling Competencies

Krista M. Malott¹ and Christopher D. Schmidt¹

Abstract
This article provides a review of the literature regarding transracial adoption and counseling families formed through transracial adoption. Recommendations are reported according to essential awareness, knowledge, and skills necessary in work with this client population. The need for counselor competency in addressing client racial and ethnic identity development is a salient theme highlighted throughout the literature.

Keywords
adoption, transracial adoption, transracial families, multicultural counseling competencies; family counseling; racial and cultural identity development

Transracial adoption has been defined as the adoption of a child from one racial or cultural group by a parent or couple from another racial or cultural group (Simon & Alstein, 1977). Adoptees may come from the United States (e.g., domestically) or internationally, and the practice has almost exclusively involved Whites adopting children of color or of non-American nationalities (Quiroz, 2008). Although a relatively new practice in the United States, beginning with the post–World War II adoptions of international youth from Japan and China (Weil, 1994), over time the population of transracial adoptees has grown to present a formidable number and voice across political and professional arenas (e.g., Eldridge, 1999; Grice, 2005; John, 2005; Simon & Roorda, 2000).

The U.S. Department of State (2009) reports that U.S. parents have adopted nearly a half-million children from other countries since 1971, the majority of them from orphanages throughout South America, Asia, and Africa. Domestically, the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse (2008) estimates that transracial adoption from the foster care system has grown from a rate of 10.8% in fiscal year 1995, with 20,000 total, to a rate of 15% in 2001, with 50,000 children adopted transracially. Although the number of international adoptions has slowed recently in comparison to prior years (U.S. Department of State, 2009), there is some evidence for a continued, upward trend of the practice of domestic transracial adoption (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2009; Hansen & Simon, 2004).

Counselors have the ability to greatly affect families formed through transracial adoption (Bradley & Hawkins-León, 2002; Fishman & Harrington, 2007). They can be involved with a family’s adoption process at any stage, from the initial step of considering transracial adoption (e.g., preplacement counseling), to later stages, when families seek mental health assistance to address general adoption issues or issues specific to the transracial experience itself. A crucial tenet in understanding familial issues at any stage is the historical and present day controversies related to the practice of transracial adoption, which have informed related laws and policies (Tuan, 2008) and, most importantly, influenced the attitudes and behaviors of mental health professionals serving such families (Fenster, 2002; Roorda, 2007). Consequently, counseling transracial families requires a unique knowledge set that extends beyond what is necessary for work with same-ethnic or -racial adoptive families (Baden & O’Leary Wiley, 2007).

The unique feature, and area of greatest controversy, regarding transracial adoption lies in a concern for the identity development of transracial adoptees. Much empirical evidence has shown adjustment outcomes of transracial adoptees to be similar to adopted youth placed in same-race or -ethnic families (Juffer & van Ijzendoorn, 2007; McRoy, Zurcher, Lauderdale, & Anderson, 1982, 1984; Shireman & Johnson, 1986; Simon & Alstein, 1977). Other studies, however, have demonstrated that transracially adopted youth experience challenges in developing a sense of pride or belonging to their racial or cultural group.

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practice of transracial families and transracial adoptees will be described. The literature will be organized beneath the main categories of the Multicultural Counseling Competencies (Arredondo et al., 1996), which delineate the importance of awareness, knowledge, and skills for effective cross-cultural counseling.

Multicultural Counseling Competencies and Transracially Adoptive Families

An extensive literature review was implemented regarding transracial adoption or counseling transracial families across Psychinfo, ERIC, and sociological abstracts’ databases. Empirical and theoretical literature was included from journals, private and government organizational documents, and textbooks. It should be noted that the content that follows is unique from the counseling competencies, in that it builds upon those competencies with specific suggestions for work with transracially adopted families. Although general competencies for work with all adoptees are considered equally important, a lack of space precludes inclusion of those tenets. Hence, the principle focus will be upon counselor self-awareness (or attitudes and beliefs), knowledge, and skills identified as unique to work with families formed through transracial adoption (described as transracial families by the author).

Awareness

Culturally skilled counselors working with transracial families must possess awareness of their personal beliefs and biases regarding transracial adoption. For instance, counselors should examine whether they believe that White parents are capable of successfully raising children of color (Fishman & Harrington, 2007). Another example of personal bias that is commonly found among mental health professionals and laypersons is the belief that children should look like their parents (Fenster, 2002; Griffith & Bergeron, 2006). Consequently, counselors must be able to examine such beliefs, along with the potential impact of those beliefs, upon their work with transracial families (Lee, 2003).

Experts have asserted that counselors best equipped to assist transracial families are those with awareness of their own racial and cultural backgrounds (Bradley & Hawkins-León, 2002). This allows counselors a better understanding of their impact upon clientele of color, as well as increases the likelihood that they will possess a greater comfort level in addressing racism within transracial families or the environment itself. Personal racial awareness will also better equip counselors to understand the importance of the racial socialization process of transracially adopted youth (Bradley & Hawkins-León, 2002).

Finally, culturally competent counselors will possess a belief in the importance of keeping abreast of current empirical findings related to transracial youth. They recognize the need for continued understanding of best practices, according to interventions and support, for transracial persons and their families. They are committed to the belief that any discrimination awareness, knowledge, and skills for effective cross-cultural counseling.
of transracial adoptees warrants intervention. Key areas that
inform counselor intervention strategies include empirical
evidence of the following: ways to support families in promoting
the healthy development of adoptee’s racial and cultural iden-
tities; continued pathways for addressing the stigma attached to
transracial adoption; and combating the racism affecting trans-
racial adoptees (Bradley & Hawkins-León, 2002).

Culturally skilled counselors possess awareness of the
stigma that surrounds adoption and how that stigma may affect
adoptees or adoptive families (Wegar, 2000). This includes any
stigma or biases held by White families seeking transracial
adoption (for instance, perceiving transracial adoption with a
paternalistic attitude, as opposed to a desire for creating a fam-
ily (Briggs, 2003). They seek awareness of clients’ attitudes
regarding race issues, such as how White parents may perceive
the role of race in shaping the experiences and identities of their
children of color (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute,
2009). In exploring parent awareness of these issues within a
counseling setting, Roorda (2007) provided a comprehensive
set of questions and suggestions that could be posed to White
adopting parents. Examples include reasons parents chose
transracial adoption; their willingness to allow their children
of color to embrace their same-race communities; their percep-
tions of the adopted children’s ethnic communities of origin;
awareness of resources from that child’s community; and plans
for creating a support system for the family and child.

Knowledge

Culturally skilled counselors possess knowledge of their own
racial identity redevelopment process, along with recognition
of how privilege or oppression affects them personally and
within their profession. They also are knowledgeable about
current theoretical and empirical literature that may address
personal biases regarding race and ethnicity as well as transra-
cial adoption itself (Griffith & Bergeron, 2006).

Culturally skilled counselors should possess knowledge of
the history and controversy surrounding transracial adoption
for domestic, as well as international, adoption as found in the
literature (e.g., Bradley & Hawkins-León, 2002; Briggs, 2003;
Haugaard, Dorman, & Schustack, 1997; Patton-Imani, 2002;
Samuels, 2009; The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute,
2008). This includes understanding of how current and past
controversy uniquely affects transracial persons and their fam-
ilies (Samuels, 2009). Counselors should understand that part
of the debate stems from beliefs by many mental health profes-
sionals, and historically by the National Association of Black
Social Workers (NABSW) itself (cited in McRoy 1989 and
Simon & Alstein, 1977) that White parents are unequipped
to assist adopted children of color develop healthy racial iden-
tities, as well as to address systemic and individual racism
(Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Lash Esau, 2000; Jennings,
2006; Park & Green, 2000).

Additional controversy lies in the critique of the policies
and practices of transracial adoption itself. Authors have
argued that racism underlies practices in the child welfare
system, from poverty issues and dominant cultural percep-
tions of certain parenting practices that have led to the dispro-
portionate placement of Black children in the system (Dill,
Zinn, & Patton, 1999; Patton-Imani, 2002) to the dominant-
cultural practices of the adoption process and the high financial
costs of adoption. Authors identify those factors as resulting in
adoption practices that predominantly benefit White middle and
upper class families (Chandra, Abma, Maza, & Bacharach,
1999; Freundlich, 2000; Jennings, 2006; Patton-Imani, 2002;
Quiroz, 2008).

International adoption has remained slightly less controver-
sial than domestic adoption, due to a perception that the adop-
ton of orphaned youth from economically depressed countries
trumps any issues related to youth ethnic identity development
(Yoon, 2007). Critiques, however, have argued, that similar
dynamics exist between the two practices, whereby a kind
paternalistic, or socially constructed “ideology of rescue” that
depends upon a portrayal of economically stressed populations
and the avoidance of the actual forces that serve to perpetuate
such situations (Briggs, 2003). According to the controversy
concerning international adoptions, Briggs (2003) asserted
that “this secular salvation theology authorized not only
child-feeding programmes, however, but military interven-
tionism everywhere,” (p. 183). Additional controversy
regarding international adoption lies in concerns regarding
possible baby selling, kidnapping, or the forced labor of adop-
tees that have resulted in the discontinuation of adoption by
some countries (Lee, 2003). Consequently, counselors work-
ing with transracial families should understand such contro-
versies that continue to fuel debate, policies, and practices
regarding transracial adoption.

Beyond such controversy, counselors should possess knowl-
edge of the impact White parents can have on the healthy
development of transracial adoptees. In a review of the empiri-
cal literature regarding the facilitation of cultural identity
development of transracial adoptees, the Evan B. Donaldson
their children’s understanding of and comfort with their own
ethnicities, the children show more positive adjustment in
terms of higher levels of self-esteem, lower feelings of margin-
ality, greater ethnic pride, less distress, and better psychologi-
cal adjustment” (p. 6).

Hence, culturally competent counselors should possess and
impact knowledge of the theoretical and empirical literature
regarding effective identity development practices with transra-
cial adoptees (Samuels, 2009). For instance, in one study of
transracial adoptees, Mohanty, Keokse, and Sales (2007) found
that parental support for cultural socialization correlates posi-
tively with fewer feelings of marginality in transracially
adopted children. In addition, parents with cultural training
were perceived by transracially adopted children as more warm
and compassionate, which in turn facilitated a sense of belong-
ingness to the family (Mohanty, Keokse, & Sales, 2007).

Additional research indicates the exposure of transracial
youth to same-ethnic or -racial peers, role models, and groups
across multiple settings as key in developing their respective
ethnic and racial identities (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2009; Simon & Roorda, 2000). Somewhat related, a study by Zabriskie and Freeman (2004) demonstrated that regular leisurely interactions with other transracially adopted families correlated with higher family functioning for those families.

In addition to the importance of an empirical knowledge base, culturally competent counselors should also understand past and present theoretical developmental models essential to transracial identity development. For example, Padilla and colleagues (2010) applied Phinney’s (1989) ethnic identity development model to transracially adopted youth, recognizing the importance of developing a strong and positive sense of belonging to one’s ethnic group. Baden and Steward (2000) developed an identity model that calls for a more complex understanding of the process of identity formation for transracially adopted youth. The model allows distinction between racial and cultural identity and considers various adoptee dimensions in relation to their own and their parents’ cultural and racial groups (Baden, 2002). Part of the process of cultural and racial identity development involves gaining skills in addressing racism. In order for youth to learn this skill, parents must first understand the presence and effects of racial discrimination in the United States. For instance, many Whites have grown up in segregated, all-White communities, in which they continue to live after adopting transracially (Frankenberg & Lee, 2002), which potentially removes them from the reality of racism experienced by their children of color. In addition, some research has shown that Whites adopting transracially may choose to espouse a color-blind attitude (McRoy et al., 1982; Zhang & Lee, 2011), whereby they assume that race is unimportant and, therefore, should not be acknowledged (Forman, 2004). Evidence suggests that minimizing the importance of race and the affects of racism can negatively impact such children (Bradley & Hawkins-León, 2002; McRoy & Zurcher, 1983), and research has demonstrated that some White parents may downplay racism and its effects with their transracially adopted children (Andujo, 1988; Friedlander et al., 2000; Johnson, Shireman, & Watson, 1987; Scroggs & Heitfeld, 2000). Such devaluing behavior is troubling, considering the level of racism that youth of color continue to experience in society, a critical base of knowledge counselors should possess.

For instance, in a study with Korean-born youth (Evan B. Adoption Institute, 2009), 48% reported negative experiences related to their race in interacting with friends, and 39% reported experiencing race-based discrimination from their teachers. Indeed, the literature is replete with documentation of youth of color experiencing racial discrimination from school officials or within school policies, from elementary to university levels (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005; Educational Testing Service, 2010; Lee, 1991; Malott, 2010; Pew Hispanic Center, 2009; Yosso, Smith, Seja, & Solorzano, 2009). Families with African or African American adoptees should particularly be aware of the disproportionate treatment of Black children who receive more severe disciplinary actions from teachers and administrators than White students for the same behaviors, who are more frequently placed into lower level or noncollege track courses, and who are erroneously assigned to special education programs (Barbarin, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2000; Watkins & Kurtz, 2001). In turn, experts have asserted that such discrimination in school settings engenders the higher dropout rates for youth of color and the subsequent participation of those youths in the judicial system, a phenomenon that has been dubbed by scholars as a “school to prison pipeline” (Barbarin, 2010; Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2000).

Parents must also understand that Black males, in particular, are more often targeted by community members or law enforcement officers as “suspicious” or “menacing” (Bradley & Hawkins-León, 2002), which experts have asserted can result in greater anxiety and lowered levels of self-esteem for those youth (Greene, 1992; Lee, 1991). Conversely, due to the dominant culture stereotype of Asian youth as well adjusted and academically high-achieving, Asian adoptees may be overlooked if they experience academic or emotional challenges (Qin, Way, & Mukherjee, 2008). Hence, beyond the awareness of discrimination toward youth of color and its impact, counselors can emphasize the need for parents to have a regular presence in school settings, with a commitment to immediate intervention in discriminatory situations. Additionally, counselors should possess knowledge of local resources that can assist families in various ways, particularly in regard to managing racism and ethnically socializing their child. Such resources could include same-ethnic or -racial mentors and social networks with other transracial families (de Haymes & Simon, 2003).

Finally, counselors working with transracially adopted families should understand that many transracial adoptees, both domestically and internationally, are more often adopted when older than their White, domestically adopted counterparts (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2002), which potentially brings with it an additional set of challenges. For instance, older adoptees should be observed for possible delays (social–emotional, cognitive, and motor skills development) that sometimes result from institutional stays (Meese, 2005). Counselors working with international adoptees who came to the United States at later ages should also be aware of language acquisition issues and to assist parents and school professionals in understanding that adoptees with delayed English language skills are not necessarily impaired in other ways. Such advocacy can prevent the erroneous labeling and placement of those youth into special education services (Meese, 2002).

Skills
Culturally skilled counselors seek out resources and support to address their own personal biases, including racial biases or negative beliefs regarding transracial adoption. Support may also include supervision or consultation with transracial adoption experts. These counselors also continually seek additional professional training to extend their knowledge base and skills for work with transracial families.
Regarding skills in work with clientele, the literature suggests a wide array of counseling mediums for work with transracial families, including individual, family, and group counseling, as well as consultation and advocacy practices (Bradley & Hawkins-León, 2002). Indeed, in response to a call for expanded parental preparation and postplacement support regarding transracial adoption (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2009), counselors could offer adoption support, psychoeducational groups (Bradley & Hawkins-León, 2002), or multifamily groups. Such groups could address the importance of race, instruction on racial identity development, and skill building in recognizing and confronting racial discrimination (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2009). Within psychoeducational groups, Vonk and Angaran (2003) asserted the importance of using a variety of experiential techniques in teaching transracial families, believing that client emotional involvement will facilitate client change or growth (Weaver, 1998). Dilemma discussions, role-plays, and group exercises can make possible this type of involvement.

The family counseling setting, in particular, is endowed with manifold opportunities to assist families in all stages of the transracial adoption process. Considering the multisystemic nature of transracially adoptive families, systemic approaches, such as feminist family therapy, that address concerns from multiple system levels can be especially beneficial (Miller, 2008). A critical initial step involves effectively joining with the family through listening and developing discussions to help bring to the surface the family’s current structure, hierarchy, rules, values, and belief systems. Gaining an introductory phenomenological understanding of the family’s current organization and patterns of communication will inform the extent and timing of particular interventions. Counselors can utilize awareness exploration activities to bring to light cultural biases and even begin to approach a deeper understanding of the motives behind the adoption process. Guided actualizations, enactments, and family sculpting exercises could more readily allow for practice in communication strategies for handling experiences of racism, inquiries from others about the transracial dynamic of the family, and enhance the comfort level for sharing unexpressed conflicts. Proper facilitation of such interventions ultimately helps establish productive communication patterns which enhance resilienties and better prepare families for future stressors.

Counselors should also possess the skills necessary to facilitate the racial and ethnic identity development of adopted youth of color (Samuels, 2009), as well as to educate families of the process (Vonk & Angaran, 2003). Part of this work requires that counselors facilitate parent understanding of the complexity of Whiteness norms, how those norms affect both themselves and their children of color (Samuels, 2009), and how to recognize and address racism as it surfaces in themselves, the parents (e.g., such as in the form of color blindness; McRoy et al., 1984). Counselors can also provide resources in addressing this topic, such as reference materials for readings, cultural mentors, and social networks that allow transracial families to discuss and learn about ethnic or racial issues (de Haymes & Simon, 2003). With any counseling medium, counselors can provide educational materials regarding the historical and contemporary legal and societal issues that make transracial adoption controversial (Chandra, et al., 1999; Freundlich, 2000; Jennings, 2006; Quiroz, 2008).

Finally, counselors must possess skills specific for addressing racism. For instance, school counselors are in a key position to address stereotypes or school policies that affect transracial adoptees (Evan B. Adoption Institute, 2009). At times, such work requires social justice advocacy, whereby they empower families or youth to confront racism within the system or individuals who maintain the system (Vera & Speight, 2003). At other times, it may require skill building (e.g., role playing) in parents or transracial youth about the various ways they can confront racism, including the most impactful language they can use, when confronting individuals. Counselors should be aware of the various local organizations that promote skills in antiracist advocacy and which can be a meaningful resource for transracial families (Vera & Speight, 2003).

Summary

This article sought to inform counselors about the history, controversies, and current state of research concerning transracial adoptive families so they may begin to incorporate this information into their developing competencies. While the expansion of a counselor’s repertoire to include the necessary awareness, knowledge, and skills to advance transracial adoptive familial development might pragmatically begin with initial client contact, preparatory measures can and should be taken. Many of such measures can occur within counselor education. Alongside the requisite mastery of therapeutic skills and content knowledge, an equally important aspect of counselor development entails a student’s ability to synthesize and discriminate the complexities of professional practice. For example, in working with transracial families, counselors will need to delineate between family challenges in general and those that are additionally influenced by ethnic or racial identity development.

These abilities are facilitated through student achievement of developmental progressions and a critical developmental domain must be multicultural competency. Education and training programs, and particularly marriage and family therapy programs, have placed efforts toward supporting counselors’ multicultural development (McGoldrick et al., 1999); integrating competencies related to working with transracial adoptive families will further extend these efforts. Much of the responsibility for enhancing students’ awareness, knowledge, and skills in this arena through the recommendations made in this article, as well as other means, falls on educators’ abilities and willingness to provide the types of developmentally oriented environments in which this type of growth occurs (i.e. feeling heard and validated, holding open and honest discourse, supporting and challenging ideas and beliefs; McDowell, 2004).
As increasing numbers of transracial adoptions occur in this country, counselors are well positioned to play a critical role in preparing these families to effectively negotiate family life cycle transitions, many of which may be unique to their circumstances (O’Brien & Zamostny, 2003). Alongside personal cultural awareness, in conceptualizing interventions with this population, counselors are encouraged to take into account the historical controversies as well as the growing empirical literature advancing best practices in working with this population. A counselor’s multicultural competency is in constant preparation of these families to effectively work with transracial adoptive families is an adaptation necessary for therapeutic advancement and ultimately to the benefit of the counselor’s clientele.

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