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# Counseling Families Formed by Transracial Adoption: Bridging the Gap in the Multicultural Counseling Competencies

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## 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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(Baden, 2002; Feigelman & Silverman, 1983; Freundlich & Lieberthal, 2000; Johnson, Shireman, & Watson, as cited in Haugaard, Dorman, & Schustack, 1997; McRoy & Zurcher, 1983) and in coping with racism from peers and adults in their environments (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2009; Feigelman, 2000). Experts have asserted that a strong ethnic identity is essential for youth of color in forming a sense of social and emotional well-being (Padilla, Vargas, & Chavez, 2010; Phinney & Ong, 2007; Umaña-Taylor, 2004) and in responding to environmental stressors such as discrimination (Phinney & Chavira, 1995; Umaña-Taylor, Vargas-Chanes, Garcia, & Gonzales-Backen, 2008).

Consequently, the empirical literature suggests a need for facilitating White parents' understanding of the unique developmental trajectory for transracially adopted youth (Crumbley, 1999; Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2009; Hollingsworth, 1998; Vonk & Angaran, 2003). Many parents themselves may be aware of this task. For instance, an in-depth study of 20 transracial families revealed awareness of the need, although they perceived themselves as insufficiently prepared to facilitate their child's ethnic identity (de Haymes & Simon, 2003). Mental health professionals, however, may be meeting this need inadequately. One survey of 195 public and private adoption agencies demonstrated that mental health practitioners provided such training for only half of all families (Vonk & Angaran, 2003), and another found postadoption support and parent training absent for many White parents (Kallgren & Caudill, 1993). In addition, in an extensive search for literature meant to increase White parents' understanding of the importance of race and ethnic identity development of their child and newly formed family, Quiroz (2008) concluded, "Analogously to the U.S. approach to multicultural education in public schools, the intersection of race and adoption is generally understood to be a one-chapter topic and not necessary to understanding other aspects of adoption. Consequently, proportionately few pages are devoted to the issues of race, ethnicity, and racism" (p. 255).

Further exacerbating this problem is the fact that counselors, to whom transracial families may turn to for such education, may have received limited, if any, professional training concerning work with transracial families (Baden & O'Leary Wiley, 2007; Zamostny, O'Leary Wiley, O'Brien, Lee, & Baden, 2003). In addition, as one study found, many practitioners working with transracial families are White (Vonk & Angaran, 2003). Consequently, those persons may lack experience or knowledge related to race and ethnicity topics (such as ways to attend to discrimination or to promote the healthy development of youth who experience discrimination) that would allow them to better aid such a population (Vonk & Angaran, 2003). Such findings emphasize the importance of specialized training for counselors who work with transracial families.

In response to these many challenges, this article provides a summary of the literature regarding competent work with transracial adoptees and their families. Key areas for counselor competency will be identified, and issues pertaining to the

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

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 identities; continued pathways for addressing the stigma attached to transracial adoption; and combating the racism affecting transracial 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 family (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 perceptions 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 transracial 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 families (Samuels, 2009). Counselors should understand that part of the debate stems from beliefs by many mental health professionals, 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 identities, 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 perceptions of certain parenting practices that have led to the disproportionate 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 controversial than domestic adoption, due to a perception that the adoption 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 interventionism everywhere," (p. 183). Additional controversy regarding international adoption lies in concerns regarding possible baby selling, kidnapping, or the forced labor of adoptees that have resulted in the discontinuation of adoption by some countries (Lee, 2003). Consequently, counselors working with transracial families should understand such controversies that continue to fuel debate, policies, and practices regarding transracial adoption.

Beyond such controversy, counselors should possess knowledge of the impact White parents can have on the healthy development of transracial adoptees. In a review of the empirical literature regarding the facilitation of cultural identity development of transracial adoptees, the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute (2008) concluded, "When parents facilitate 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 marginality, greater ethnic pride, less distress, and better psychological adjustment" (p. 6).

Hence, culturally competent counselors should possess and impart knowledge of the theoretical and empirical literature regarding effective identity development practices with transracial adoptees (Samuels, 2009). For instance, in one study of transracial adoptees, Mohanty, Keokse, and Sales (2007) found that parental support for cultural socialization correlates positively 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 belongingness 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 chose 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, & Solórzano, 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 resiliencies 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 counselor 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 evolution; taking the initiative toward preparing 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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