

When ‘Good Intentions’ Backfire: A Case for Non-Transracial Legal Guardianship Rather Than Adoption and Why Transracial Adoption Is Not Trauma Informed

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ABSTRACT What are the consequences or impacts of transracial adoptions where the adopters are in the United States adopting either in the United States (domestic) or internationally (inter-country)? Findings from this study suggest that transracial adoptions have caused and continue to cause adoptees significant trauma and distress despite healing efforts like therapy, connecting with other transracial adult adoptees, and ceasing contact with adopters, for example. This article explores the experiences of transracial adoptees, the majority of whom use three words to describe the impact of their adoptions—trauma, grief, and loss. The primary recommendation is for the abolition of transracial adoptions, whether within the United States (domestic) or international (inter-country) as they are a harmful and legal mechanism that causes family separation and loss despite incorporating trauma informed practice. Non-transracial legal guardianship is a more trauma informed approach than transracial adoption that can ensure that children are safe and living in a home that allows them to not only survive, but thrive. These recommendations can be implemented if social workers are trained to be part of the solution of mitigating harm to children, rather than being complicit by allowing transracial adoption to continue.

KEYWORDS transracial adoption, transnational adoption, grounded theory, trauma informed practice, white saviorism, white savior industrial complex (WSIC), social policy, abolition

ONE OF THE MOST PRESSING issues of social inequality today is hidden in plain sight—transracial adoptions. Transracial adoptions occur when a child of one race/ethnicity is placed with an adoptive parent or parents (also called an adopter or adopters) of another race/ethnicity (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 1994). Transracial adoptions happen domestically (within the same country) or transnationally (also called international or intercountry), meaning a child born in one country is adopted by a person or people in another country (Pact Adopt International and Transnational Adoption, n.d.; Silverman, 1993). According to the Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families and the National Council for Adoption, nearly all (90%)

of transracial adoptions are Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC)/People of the Global Majority (PGM)/children of color placed in white¹ households (University of Nevada, Reno, n.d.).

Transracial adoptions are often transnational adoptions. A recent study indicates that for almost a decade, six countries—China, Ethiopia, India, South Korea, Ukraine, and Vietnam—were major origin countries from 2003-2011 (Selman, 2013). In 2019, the top sending countries from which U.S. adopters acquired children were China, Ukraine, Colombia, India, South Korea, Bulgaria, Haiti, and Nigeria (Crary, 2020; U.S. Department of State, 2019). Of the countries mentioned, as of the writing of this article, Ethiopia is the only country that has shifted entirely from supplying children for transnational adoptions effectively banning the adoption of children by foreigners (BBC News, 2018; Moses, 2021, para. 1).²

This research seeks to answer the question: What are the impacts of transracial adoptions on transracial adoptees, whether domestic in the United States or international? This article's focus is on transracial adoption as a product of the white savior industrial complex (WSIC) and as derivative of colonialism and imperialism, which is rooted in white supremacy or superiority, used interchangeably throughout. This article provides a holistic look at the impact this racialized practice has on adoptees and its connection to the WSIC, while also outlining the role of social work in combating these issues. Social workers have a responsibility to come alongside transracial adoptees in a meaningful, helpful, and appropriate way. Moreover, some of these issues, not all, will be mitigated with the abolition of transracial adoption.

THE HISTORY OF TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION

Transracial adoption is connected to a complicated history of oppression and is rooted in such horrific practices as chattel slavery and the forced removal of Native children from their homes to be adopted into white families as cheap labor or to be put in assimilationist boarding schools that stripped them of their cultures, languages, cultural attire, spiritual practices, and humanity for land (Estes, 2019). Korean adoption, a product of post-colonial and post-war national decimation, has been a promulgating force as well as China's one-child policy, both creating a market for, and thus supplying, children to those with means who can pay for the transaction (Constante, 2020; Haruch, 2014). Moreover, transracial and transnational adoption has been popularized by celebrities, including Mia Farrow, Madonna, Angelina Jolie, Sandra Bullock, Steven Spielberg, and Katherine Heigl (Abrahamson, 2021; Bueno, 2021; Fieldstadt, 2021; Gurley, 2022; Nelson, 2017; Todisco, 2021), and has been a consistent trope in mainstream media, e.g. *Different Strokes (1978-86)*, *Webster (1983-89)*, *The Blind Side (2009)*, *Modern Family (2009-20)*, and *The Chair (2021)*. Adoption has become a multibillion-dollar industrial complex—a wide-reaching, unregulated, capitalistic business system that is enmeshed with social, cultural, economic, and political systems in service of profit and power (Harvard Political Review, 2012; Raleigh, 2018). The adoption industry is a large employer of a broad range of professions as it supplies children to markets across the globe (Hogan, n.d.; Root, 2021).

¹ Note on capitalization: I capitalize “Black” and lowercase “white” when referring to these two identity groups to follow the recent Brookings’ decision to update their style guide as a result of months of research. Their rationale is in alignment with my desire to practice equity, “It is an act in recognition of racial respect for those who have been generations in the ‘lower case’” (Lanham & Liu, 2019).

² As a receiving country, in 2021, the Netherlands “temporarily halted all adoptions from abroad after an investigation found that the government had failed to act on known abuses, including child theft and trafficking” (Moses, 2021, para 1).

An unintended consequence of this adoption boom is the trauma inflicted upon adopted children and their biological parents and families (also called first/natural parents and families).³ Many transracially adopted children, internationally or domestically, are not orphans, but rather have living family members, some whose family members wanted them but simply did not have the financial resources to keep them. In international adoption, some vulnerable and unsupported parents place children in orphanages, believing placement is temporary only to return finding their children are gone, and they have little to no opportunity for recourse (Fillpovic, 2013; Fronek, 2012; Joyce, 2016). These parents have made or were forced into these decisions due to desperation because of systemic issues such as poverty; lack of health insurance, financial resources, and support; and mental health concerns exacerbated by coercion and unbalanced power. Adult adoptees, like the ones surveyed for this article, often face emotional and informational holes such as an incomplete medical history and lack of knowledge of one's culture or familial ties navigating life through "the lens of a displaced person" (Pine, 2015).

Affected communities and racial justice groups have been pushing back against transracial adoption for decades, and now, as transracial adoptees themselves have grown up, there is a broad movement of adult adoptees speaking out against this practice. Unfortunately, they are often met with hostility that asserts the "colorblind ideology" and the "adoption is beautiful" metanarrative. Refusing to consider and hear voices and perspectives of transracial adoptees has resulted in an overabundance of transracial adoptions occurring in communities and countries who are unlike their adopters, of which the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) spoke out against over 50 years ago (NABSW, 1972). In their 1972 position paper they say,

The National Association of Black Social Workers has taken vehement stand against the placement of Black children in white homes for any reason. We affirm the inviolable position of Black children in Black families where they belong physically, psychologically, and culturally in order that they receive the total sense of themselves and develop a sound projection of their future. (p. 1)

This excerpt is explicit about the NABSW's position on transracial adoption—Black children should never be placed in white homes, under any and all circumstances. Black social workers at that time believed the importance of racial mirroring, identity development, and the holistic way Black children should be raised. As such, the refusal to consider what transracial adoptees are saying about their own experiences *and* the refusal to consider what experts—Black social workers—are saying is deliberate and harmful. And even if adopters are unaware of their participation and complicity in causing harm, they *are* perpetuating a sordid history. The next section will explore the problem of transracial adoption and its connection to colonialism and white saviorism.

THE PROBLEM: THE LEGACY OF COLONIALISM AND WHITE SAVIORISM

In transracial and transnational adoption history, colonialism, imperialism, white supremacy, and the white savior industrial complex are related and deeply connected. The underlying motivation for

³ There is not universal agreement on the terms to be used in this movement. I used the terms in the article to be as inclusive as possible while using language that is used by a range of transracial adoptees. I also appreciate that language, which is part of culture, is always evolving.

all of these ideological positions is domination in order to increase power, wealth, influence, and control.

Much of colonial and imperial history is simultaneously rooted in white superiority. Three of the four tenets of The Anti-Defamation League (ADL)'s definition of white supremacy apply to transracial adoption: 1) whites should have dominance over people of other backgrounds, especially where they may co-exist; 2) white people have their own "culture" that is superior to other cultures; 3) white people are genetically superior to other people (Anti-Defamation League, 2017). The European colonization of Native lands in the United States offers a perfect example of colonization rooted in white supremacist ideology.

White supremacy manifests as the fetishization of children of color: the belief that BIPOC/PGM/POC children are genetically superior (e.g., racist stereotypes that children of color are cuter than white children; Black children are more athletic; East Asian children are more scholarly and disciplined). In transracial and/or transnational adoption, instead of classic colonialism—taking over and occupying the material land another people—the white people confiscate and lay claim to the children of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people and nations, in alignment with two ADL tenets of white supremacy: white people should have dominance over others in addition to the belief that white culture is superior.

Positioning whiteness in superior positions of power, transracial and transnational adoption are often motivated by the “humanitarian” belief in saving Black and Brown children from their families of origin and that assimilating into white families and culture is what is best for them. In other words, white people believe they are better than and better equipped to handle the issues and problems of Black, Brown, and Indigenous families (Tubbs, 2021). Another point of entry for transracial adoption in the United States, which has recently come under fire for many reasons including the overrepresentation of Black children, racism, the trauma of separation from family, and how social workers are used for the purposes of family separation, is the foster care system (Dettlaff et al., 2020).

In his famous 2012 article in *The Atlantic*, Teju Cole describes this specific type of white supremacy as white saviorism, which has produced the lucrative white savior industrial complex (WSIC). One example is mission-based tourism to “disadvantaged third world” countries, also called “voluntourism” where mostly privileged white people take extensive trips to “help the less fortunate” (Anderson et al., 2021; Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, 2007; McGehee, 2014). Religious mission trips, particular, are fabric swatches in the U.S. tapestry (Anderson et al., 2021) and are a clear example of white saviorism. People who practice a faith tradition, oftentimes Christianity, feel “called” to be of service to the “other” (Anderson et al., 2021; Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, 2007; McGehee, 2014) in the United States and in countries that inhabit People of the Global Majority. But there are many types of experiences white people can purchase in this organizational ecology of aid, including adoption (Joyce, 2013a; Joyce, 2013b; Joyce, 2016) Peace Corps (Kallman, 2019; 2020; Loga, 2020; Schecter, 2011), and movies (Hughey, 2014). In these experiences, the “white savior” gets to demonstrate their selfless sacrifices—adopting transracially, becoming a Peace Corps volunteer, helping a “less privileged” Black or Brown child—so that they’re able to (1) feel better about themselves and (2) humblebrag professionally and personally, on their CV or their social media feed, respectively (Cole, 2012).

In the WSIC, well-meaning white people go to places outside of their typical realities to experience the reward of “helping” those for whom they feel sorry (Aronson, 2017). Though the “needy” are supposed to be given help, white people and their experiences end up at the center.

Their underlying assumption about their superiority leads to over-confidence in believing they are the solution, or that only they have access to the solutions (Anderson et al., 2021; Cole, 2012; Flaherty, 2016; No White Saviors, 2018). Cole says, “There is the idea that those who are being helped ought to be consulted over the matters that concern them” (Cole, 2012). In the WSIC, this belief is non-existent or ignored. They often do more harm than good, or at least, reinforce existing harmful systems and circumstances (Cole, 2012).

Transracial adoption is a manifestation of white saviorism and a significant contributor to the WSIC, as the white adopters believe they are committed to making the lives of the adoptee(s) better (Valby, n.d.). This illuminates the power differentials at play, thus showing how colonialism, imperialism, white superiority, and the white savior industrial complex are present within transracial adoptions. After the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, 10 white U.S. citizens were arrested trying to transport 33 Haitian babies out of the country for a Christian adoption agency without any evidence the children were orphans (Delva, 2010). Immediately following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, white U.S. citizens started inquiring how to adopt Afghan children sparking a need for groups to push back to promote family reunification and preservation (Hanson, 2021).

White saviorism can also be steeped in Christianity. Adopting children from South Korea, Colombia, Ethiopia, India, and other countries over four decades from 1953 to 1991 (Khazan, 2021), many adopters were and continue to be white Christians who have experienced infertility or have felt “called” to expand their families through adoption. In 2007, Christians convened encouraging attendees to enroll to become adopters and foster carers (Simon, 2007). Many prospective adopters believe their infertility is a pathway to “saving” children who are “less fortunate” whether in the United States or in countries in the Global Majority which activates the WSIC and white supremacy culture (Flaherty, 2016; Hughey, 2014; Schnable, 2021). These same people would say expanding their families through adoption was “God’s will/plan” even if their fertility was not. The idea of being “called to” or “charged with” is deeply connected to religion, specifically the Christian faith tradition. Often those with these overwhelming thoughts consider their involvement with transracial adoption as part of their “mission” which explains why half (50%) of survey participants in this study were adopted through a religious, church, or nonprofit organization (Flaherty, 2016; Forbes Councils, 2017; Schnable, 2021). As such, it’s challenging for these people to think that anything they are doing to “help” others is wrong as they are participating in purposeful action (Hughey, 2014). Because their commitment has good intentions, they are unable to see that they have galvanized the WSIC (Cole, 2012; Forbes Councils, 2017).

Most people do not realize that these harmful structures or systems outweigh the positive impact these adoptions can have on the adoptees involved (Bacon, 2013; Fabello, 2021; Ozor Commer, 2021; Shabazz, 2018; Waters, 2021; White, 2021). Transracial adoptions implicitly support harmful systems, and they can be a barrier to racial mirroring (National Association of Black Social Workers, 1972) and identity formation or development (Lee, 2003; Rushton & Minnis, 1997). Moreover, in addition to the power differential that exists, white adopters also enjoy white privilege that the child(ren) in their care do not experience (Cole, 2020; Cuncic, 2020). For non-white adoptees, this can often expose them to racism (Lee, 2003), white superiority (Aizenman & Gharib, 2019; Aizenman, 2020; DuVernay & Kaepernick, 2021; McCool, 2021; Rose, 2019), and increased mental health concerns and maladaptive behaviors (Cedarblad et al., 1999; Hjern et al., 2002; Verhulst & Versluis-Den Bieman, 1995).

Many adopters believe that their intention is more important than their impact, or harm that they often cause (Bacon, 2013; Fabello, 2021; Shabazz, 2018; Waters, 2021; White, 2021). This is

inaccurate because the harm caused (even despite some positive benefits) often has long-lasting effects especially when it is not clear that the child(ren) was thought of beyond commodification, or once the adopters were able to secure the child(ren) (Bacon, 2013; Fabello, 2021; Shabazz, 2018; Waters, 2021; White, 2021). A trauma informed approach would center the person or people being harmed and consider the impact over the intent. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) includes six guiding principles for a trauma informed approach: (1) safety, (2) trustworthiness & transparency, (3) peer support, (4) collaboration & mutuality, (5) empowerment & choice, and (6) cultural, historical & gender issues (SAMHSA, n.d.). SAMHSA goes on to define trauma as “a result from an event, series of events or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional or spiritual well-being” (SAMHSA, n.d.). Based on SAMHSA’s definition, trauma can occur from a number of experiences—violence, a natural disaster, abuse, neglect, or loss including transracial adoption. Research supports that trauma experiences can impact a person’s behavior, mental health, dependence or abuse of alcohol or other drugs, and ability to engage in relationships both in their personal and professional life including with a provider or mental health professional (Gidzgiez et al., 2023; Park et al., 2021; Roy-Byrne, 2015). The definition of trauma informed used in this article is an approach or practice that considers the person’s trauma, and its widespread impact on all subsequent experiences they have from the present moving forward. This empathetic, compassionate, and understanding approach also recognizes when the trauma is re-ignited within the person, responds from a holistic approach and knowledge of the impact of trauma, and finally, is committed to resisting re-traumatization (Manning, 2022; MentalHealth.org, n.d.; Reese, 2018; SAMHSA, n.d.)

Historically, and even contemporaneously, white people in the United States have been able to adopt internationally without proving that they are *fit, let alone, more fit* to care for a child with a different culture, possibly a different language, and often a different race/ethnicity. To say that these “white saviors” are ill-equipped to “fix” problems that they believe can be resolved by adoption, and more specifically, transracial adoption is an understatement. These examples are demonstrative of the multitude of reasons that they lack the ability to come alongside those they feel “called to help” in a meaningful, helpful, and appropriate way because they lack contextual knowledge of the myriad of issues at play; for cultural and racial identity formation, they lack understanding and awareness of the cultural implications of this issue. In the case of racism and white superiority they are often advantaged or privileged because they are not only perceived as outsiders and granted access as well as given the benefit of the doubt. Meanwhile as they are centered, they are often simultaneously causing harm to adoptees without facing any consequences for their actions.

Anecdotally, adult transracial adoptees report facing emotional and informational holes such as incomplete medical history, lack of knowledge of one’s culture or familial ties, and the experience of white supremacy in broader U.S. culture and within their own adoptive families. However, adult transracial adoption has been woefully understudied. Gaps exist within current knowledge on transracial adoption. A majority of the literature that exists has focused on extolling the positives of transracial adoption (American Enterprise Institute, 2020; Gaille, 2017; Malivindi, 2021;), illuminating the complicity of transracial adoption within the Christian faith tradition (Allen, 2011; Joyce, 2013a; Joyce, 2013b; Joyce, 2016), and stories of celebrities and non-celebrities alike admitting their lack of preparation or unpreparedness with adopting transracially (Balagtas, 2021; Dawson, 2021; Kane & Mendoza, 2021, Malivindi, 2021). Further, much of the literature centers

adopters and their experiences and perspectives. Instead, this article explores the impact of transracial adoption on the adoptee from the adoptee perspective.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

An iterative and inductive research design (Gaudet & Robert, 2018) was used to answer the central research question of this study: What are the consequences or impacts of transracial adoptions domestically or internationally? Moreover, the research speaks to what policies might help address these issues and what social workers can do to help. This approach is both community-engaged (da Cruz, 2018; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011; Warren et al., 2016) and transdisciplinary (Leavy, 2016). This survey study prioritized local and Indigenous knowledge and wisdom from transracial adoptees to emerge and guide this narrative with constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; 2012; 2014; 2017; Charmaz & Belgrave, 2019; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020). Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analyzed, allowing a theory to emerge which supports the policy recommendation for non-transracial legal guardianship, an example of which could be kinship care, as a trauma informed way to offer care rather than transracial adoption (NABSW, 2003).

Methods

An online Qualtrics survey (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017; Tan & Siegel, 2018), distributed via email, yielded both qualitative and quantitative data through open- and closed-end questions from 42 transracial adoptees, the majority of whom are also transnational adoptees. Between November 2021 to March 2022, respondents were asked demographic information like age, race/ethnicity, gender, and age when they were adopted (see Appendix A for full survey protocol). The survey also included open-ended questions such as:

1. What emotions, feelings, or thoughts come up for you when you think about your adoption or being an adoptee?
2. If you're comfortable sharing, how is your relationship with the person or people who adopted you? How has your relationship changed in the last year?
3. If you feel comfortable sharing, how has your life been as an adoptee? How has adoption impacted your life? If you feel comfortable, please respond and discuss how it may have been different as a child compared to as an adult?

Their narrative was confirmed through triangulation (Green & Chian, 2018).

Sampling

The 42 survey respondents were recruited via social media and were selected based on their self-identification of being transracial adoptees adopted by white people. Two types of non-probability sampling (Lavrakas, 2008) were used: convenience and snowball sampling (Coleman & Multon, 2018; Crouse & Lowe, 2018; Waterfield, 2018). To mitigate the potential for bias, transracial adoptees were invited to participate independent of how they viewed their own adoption (Fritz & Lim, 2018).

Data analysis

Quantitative. Frequencies were calculated for the closed-ended transracial adoptee survey items and are reported throughout this article.

Qualitative. For ease of reporting, open-ended responses from all respondents were categorized by theme and a thematic analysis was conducted. Some overarching themes included, but were not limited to, the impact of or harm caused the transracial adoptee, the relationships they have or do not have with their adopter(s), and the conversations that have taken place about race during the last few years with their adopter(s). Some longer, multifaceted responses were assigned to more than one theme category. Data was analyzed by Dedoose (Consoli, 2021; Silver & Lewins, 2014) which integrates with quantitative software tools.

Rigor. To ensure design and interpretive rigor, I used my findings or results to make inferences as well as to adequately incorporate inferences from both qualitative and quantitative data (McGregor, 2018; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2006). Moreover, while I did not work with anyone to conduct the qualitative thematic coding, the findings were validated by a survey participant with background in academic research and writing who also held a position as a Senior Researcher at a User Experience design agency.

Sample Descriptives

Forty-two transracial adoptees completed the survey.

Figure 1. Demographics: Age

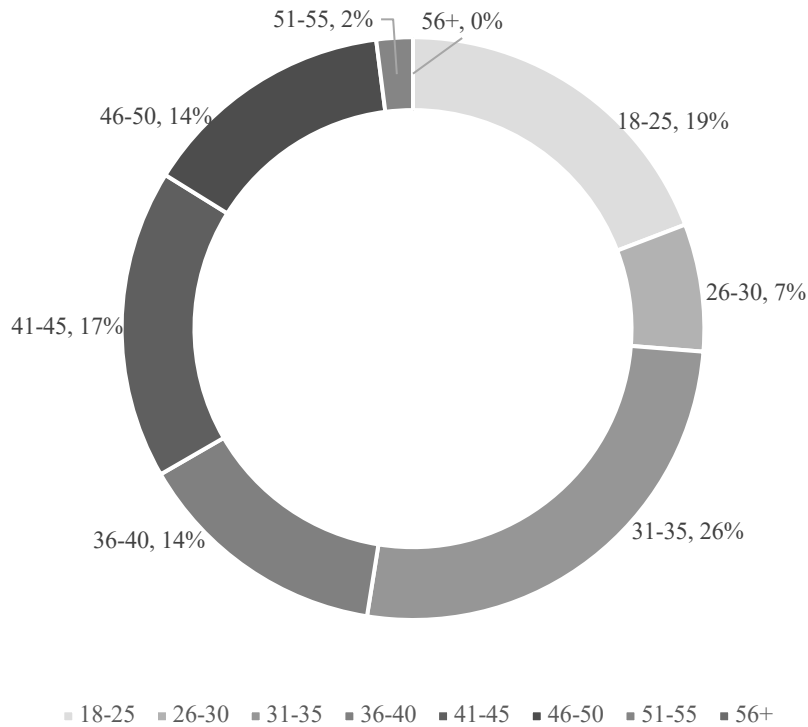
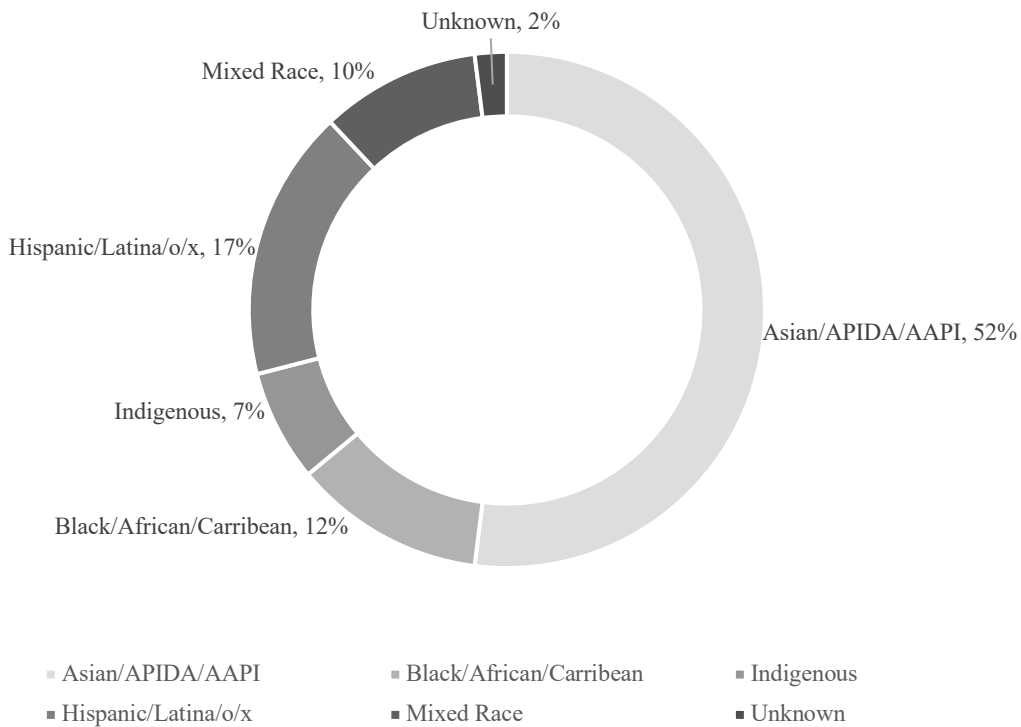


Figure 2. Demographics: Race/Ethnicity



All respondents were adopted by white people and were told by their adopters the reason for their adoption. Infertility was the number one reason why adopters adopted the respondents (52%). Other reasons included: adopting a Black child looked good at church, they wanted a daughter, it was easy to adopt a baby from South America, and one respondent’s sibling was adopted and so the respondent was also adopted.

When asked what race/ethnicity the respondents were exposed to the most when they were children, all responses were white. Nearly all respondents (88%) indicated that the person or people who adopted them did not learn about their cultural background including, but not limited to, language, food, customs, and traditions. Nearly all (83%) also reported that the person or people who adopted them did not expose them to their own cultural background. This is evidence of the presence of white saviorism, another brick in the WSIC.

FINDINGS

The Real Emotions Connected to Adoption

Many transracial adoptees are told by non-adoptees that they should feel “grateful,” “lucky,” and “chosen.” The reality is that when given an opportunity to express fully and honestly their true emotions, feelings, and thoughts about their adoption or about being an adoptee, respondents’ emotions and feelings are not in alignment with what they had been told they should feel. The surveyed adoptees reported that they felt “anger,” “sadness,” “devastation,” “heartbreak,” “a feeling

of erasure and being upset,” “silenced,” and that their adopters “exercised power and control or ownership over them.” Other emotions, feelings, and thoughts that were mentioned was that adoption was “a transactional system of commodification and violence, causing exhaustion, hurt, loneliness, dread, and death.” Respondents also wanted to know from the perspective of their parent (also called first parent or birth parent) why they were adopted prompting them to also want to know about any siblings and other family history. Overall, the emotions, feelings, and thoughts that came up about adoption is that it is traumatic, complex, hard, and complicated, and their emotions, feelings, and thoughts about adoption covered the spectrum.

When “Good Intentions” Are Not Enough

The common narrative from white adopters is that they have “good intentions” especially considering their desire to save the child or children from a horrible life “over there,” where “over there” could be in an undesirable part of the United States or in a country that is inhabited by the People of the Global Majority (Carroll, 2021; Blomeling DeRoo, n.d.; Palmer, 2017). Participants’ responses about the relationship that the transracial adoptees had with the adopters in their life are a poignant example of how white saviorism backfires causing a domino effect of unintended consequences (Stroh, 2015). Respondents responded to my question that it was a “complicated and difficult relationship,” “hard,” “loving,” that “an abusive stepparent was present,” that “their adopters were ignorant to the complexities or impact of trauma,” that “conflict and tension was present”, and that “ups and downs existed and when one respondent’s adopters divorced it intensified everything.” Only one respondent, who was in the minority in terms of their views, indicated they were “raised by two wonderful adoptive parents where they felt like a biological child, felt loved and secure in their family, and was accepted.”

One-third of respondents (33%) indicated they are estranged from their adopters and currently have no relationship with them as a result of the racial reckoning that began in 2020 amidst the Covid-19 global pandemic. Others described their relationships as “rocky,” “very good because their adopters are strong racial adoptee allies,” that “love was/is present and yet their relationship is still complicated,” and that they “are closer with one adoptive parent than the other post-divorce which has strained the relationship with their other adoptive parent.”

Race Matters

During the data collection period, the United States as well as the world, was still reeling from the murder of George Floyd on the heels of the murders of Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor. These examples of the ongoing anti-Black pandemic are from the United States, yet this anti-Blackness is not relegated to this country (Busari et al., 2022; CDC, 2021; Open Letter, 2020; Quammie, 2020; Yancy, 2022). This anti-Blackness was compounded by another global pandemic, Covid-19, which illuminated significant anti-Asian/Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI)/Asian Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA) racism in the United States (CDC, 2021; Cheng et al., 2021; Lee, 2020; Vang, 2021). With this backdrop, respondents were asked: Growing up, what, if any, conversations did you have about race with the person or people who adopted you? Fifty percent said there were none and 50% said there were some. They were then asked in the last year, what, if any, conversations they had about race with the person or people who adopted them. One-third (33%) indicated none due to the fact they are estranged from their adopters. The other responses went from “many conversations” to “some that haven’t gone well” despite an adopter expressing concern about

increased anti-Asian/AAPI/APIDA violence in 2020, especially when a white adopter centered the conversation on themselves.

True Impact of Transracial Adoption

In opposition with transracial adoptees being told what they should feel about their adoption, this survey gave respondents an opportunity, if they felt comfortable, to share how life has been as an adoptee and how their life has been impacted by adoption as well as how it may have been different as a child compared to an adult. Responses included that they were “challenging,” that they have a “lens of a displaced person whereby everything is impacted by adoption including parenting and other choices,” and that “adoption changed the trajectory of their life as they were born in one country and four months later, they were moved to the United States, and they did not provide consent or have a choice in this decision.” Other responses were that “it’s complicated,” that they “experienced pre-verbal trauma,” that “adoption has impacted their psyche and place in the world,” that “it’s been a struggle,” that they “grew up silenced and that they had to assimilate,” that they “had a reunion with their first/natural/birth parent and that their adoption was supposed to be a closed adoption,” and that their “adoption agency provided no training on race for transracial adoptions or adoption trauma.”

Respondents were asked to share what they wish people knew about transracial adoption from their perspective as transracial adoptees. Responses included “adoption is trauma, grief, and loss”; “it is an adverse childhood experience (ACE);⁴ “the transracial piece adds another layer to adoption;” “many transracial adoptees experience racism in their adoptive families and the communities in which they grew up;” “adopting transracially doesn’t make someone anti-racist or anti-oppressive;” “this is not ‘better;” “love is not colorblind; “it might be better to be adopted within one’s own country, culture, and racial/ethnic background;” “adopters need to be educated on race and the impact of racial isolation;” “adoption agencies have to be educated on how to screen out racism and make sure families that are adopting transracially have resources to support healthy racial identity;” “transracial adoption is inherently violent and that nobody should do it;” “there are a myriad of ways to support children and their families and that adoption is not one of them;” “transracial adoption is a systemic racial tool of oppression;” “inter-country (or international) adoption is a systemic imperialist tool of oppression;” “transracial adoption should be a last resort;” “the erasure that occurs with transracial adoption is astronomical and leads to constant racial and identity questioning, as such, it is never settled and that there is always the question of ‘what if’ present;” “nobody is equipped to adopt transracially;” and “kinship guardianship and cultural kinship guardianship, when the court appoints a relative or other kin as a permanent guardian which does not terminate parental rights, should always come first” (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018).

⁴ According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), “adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs, are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0-17 years). For example, experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect; witnessing violence in the home or community; or having a family member attempt or die by suicide. ACEs are linked to chronic health problems, mental illness, and substance use problems in adulthood. ACEs can also negatively impact education, job opportunities, and earning potential. However, ACEs can be prevented” (CDC, n.d.).

In Their Own Words

Several stories shared by brave transracial adoptees were heart wrenching and heart breaking. Two are shared here due to the violence—emotional, psychological, physiological, and mental—that these two participants experienced.

Lina. Lina, a Latina woman transracial adoptee from Colombia, age 41-45, said,

It [adoption] changed my life trajectory. My life has been challenging. Adoption has impacted everything in my life from relationships, the way I see the world, parenting, choices I have made. I see the world through a lens of a displaced person.

As a displaced person, she uses her platform to provide resources and support to other transracial adult adoptees and displaced people as well as educate people on the impacts of transracial adoption. She has also been a vocal activist about suicide prevention especially since adoptees are four times more likely to attempt suicide than non-adoptees (Keyes et al., 2013). While the pain of daily life is on a loop of trauma, grief, and loss, Lina experiences joy as well. She hopes to impress upon others, “I will never get over being taken from my mother. The pain just eases over time. And the anger and grief pop up, sometimes when I am least expecting it.” As an advocate, she gets messages of hatred and defensiveness from adopters, hopeful adopters, and even sometimes from other transracial adoptees. This is one of the unspoken impacts of speaking truth to power that reignites the loop of trauma, grief, and loss.

Baj. Baj,⁵ an African woman transracial adoptee, age 18-25 reported, “They always wanted to have a Black child and it looks good in church.” The “they” she referred to are the adopters in her life, a white couple, who adopted to be “white saviors” which is demonstrative of the fetishization of Black children. This poignant quote speaks to the tokenization that often happens for Black and Brown transracial adoptees. When Baj brought up race and racism to her adopters, she was shut down and they refused to speak to her about those topics which led her to make a decision to discontinue her relationship with them. She reports her adoption impacts everything, is the cause of her mental health struggles and disorders, and feelings of loneliness. What has been helpful for her has been being surrounded by other transracial adult adoptees who have a shared history and similar upbringing. She is another powerful voice within the transracial adoptee community. Her experience is demonstrative of white saviorism and how transracial adoption, independent of intent, almost always causes impact (or harm).

Finally, while the survey study conducted for this article was small (n=42), the prevailing narrative from respondents, transracial adoptees, was that they did not feel “grateful” for their adoptions because their adoptions caused significant trauma, grief, and loss. One respondent characterized adoption as an adverse childhood experience (ACE) due to the severing nature of adoption. Eight respondents (19%) also astutely pointed out that “adopting transracially doesn’t make someone anti-racist or anti-oppressive” especially when many respondents reported experiencing racism in their white families, as such, this sentiment cannot be underscored enough. Proponents of adoption often trade jabs with adult adoptees intimating that they are “colorblind” and that “love is all we need.” However, from a justice standpoint, those most impacted by

⁵ This name is a pseudonym.

adoption—transracial adoptees themselves—would push back and say that raising securely attached children who have healthy self-esteem, and are connected to their cultural background including language, food, customs, and traditions requires more than just love, and that their adoption is definitely not “better.”

DISCUSSION

From the small sample size (n=42), the results of this survey study indicate that while most transracial adoptees do not believe transracial adoption should continue as a system due to the trauma, grief, and loss it causes and because it is a racist system rooted in colonization, imperialism, ignorance, and more, it is important to note that all transracial adoptees do not feel this way. Emotions, feelings, and thoughts about respondents’ own transracial adoption were overwhelmingly negative illuminating that the consequences and impacts of transracial adoptions were negative. They were characterized by respondents as “traumatic,” “an adverse childhood experience (ACE),” “a breeding ground for racism within their own family,” “harmful,” and “psyche affecting,” which caused a ripple effect for the rest of their lives.

This is inconsistent with the adoption propaganda narrative that markets to both prospective adopters and first parents that adoption is a better option than abortion (Joyce, 2013a; Joyce, 2013b; Joyce, 2016) and that adoptees, especially transracial adoptees, should feel “grateful” (Long, 2018; Newton, 2019; Pine, 2015), that their adopters were/are “colorblind” (Killian & Khanna, 2019) with good intentions (Stroh, 2015).

Despite some adopters embarking on transracial adoption from a “colorblind lens,” transracial adoption is an important pillar in the white savior industrial complex which needs to be torn down completely as it backfires often causing harm in the form of unintended consequences (Stroh, 2015).

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

These findings are important for social workers because they center transracial adoptees in this conversation, especially since many were adopted at young ages—in this study from six weeks old to six years old—and did not consent to or have a voice in their adoptions. Moreover, since the WSIC continues to exist, it is imperative now more than ever for transracial adoptions to be interrogated due to the harms they cause. Adoptees often express feelings of trauma, grief, and loss especially as they get older and perhaps even are considering starting or have already started a family of their own (Chung, 2021; Pine, 2015). Transracial adoptees feel many of the same feelings and yet they must navigate an additional layer because of their nonwhite race/ethnicity, as well as often having to console their adopters when discussing issues of race/ethnicity, racism, white supremacy, capitalism, and the like. It is important to note that many adoptees feel like their trauma—which encompasses loss of familial ties, loss of their original self, and the grief associated with it—is the only trauma that is celebrated in ways that illness, loss of life, and even some of the ‘isms’ are not. For example, there is a ‘World Adoption Day’ that is celebrated annually on November 9 (World Adoption Day, n.d.). Further, in honor of National Adoption Awareness Month in November 2021, NPR centered the voices of transracial and transnational adoptees (Westerman, 2021).

Social workers need to learn about the history of transracial adoption, the impacts of it, and how the National Association of Black Social Workers’ position papers on transracial adoption and

kinship care can guide their work. The onus is also on social workers to listen to and center the voices and perspectives of transracial adoptees.

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) has set forth a code of ethics which includes ethical principles based on social work's core values by which social workers are bound (NASW, n.d.). In alignment with the core value of competence and the ethical principle imploring social workers to practice within their area of competence and developing and enhancing their professional expertise, social workers need to actively participate in ongoing training on biases, cultural humility, and microaggressions, in addition to prioritizing their own mental health, especially if they experience secondary trauma or compassion fatigue.

Guided by the value of social justice, social workers are charged with challenging social injustice. In their own words, most transracial adoptees that participated in this interview study shared how the system has failed them, causing them harm, marginalization, trauma, grief, and loss. In order to challenge this system, social workers need to be prepared to push back on white superiority, white saviorism, and the WSIC which has been embedded in social work, especially as it relates to children for decades (Estes, 2019; NABSW, 1972).

In her book, *Torn Apart: How the Child Welfare System Destroys Black Families—And How Abolition Can Build A Safer World*, Roberts (2022) illuminates the roles social workers have had in tearing families apart, especially Black families, through the child welfare system that she rightfully calls the family policing system. When social workers consistently respect the inherent dignity and worth of people, systems can become unearthed.

Moreover, social workers have committed to recognizing the central importance of human relationships which includes the relationships most transracial adoptees wish they had with their families. It is the role of social workers to come alongside individuals, families, and communities in a meaningful, helpful, and appropriate way. With respect to transracial adoption, social workers can lead with prioritizing the relationships that transracial adoptees want to maintain, most often the ones with their parents, siblings, and extended family. With the knowledge of the impact of transracial adoption, social workers should practice social work through a trauma informed lens and also have trauma informed resources and support for transracial adoptees such as therapists.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

These results are limited in terms of sample size. As such it is important that this study be replicated with a larger sample size to determine if the attitudes and reflections learned through this interview study are generalizable to a larger population of transracial adoptees. Another limitation is that the sampling was done through social media. While I invited all transracial adult adoptees to participate in the survey study independent of their thoughts on adoption, it is possible that respondents are adoptees that are more engaged in the transracial adoption community and in activism and advocacy. Further research is needed to continue to center transracial adoptees as they share their lived experiences. Other questions for future inquiry are:

- Why is it so difficult for white adopters to discuss race, especially considering their desire to adopt transracially?
- What is the relationship between transracial adoption and mental and physical health and the increased likelihood and risk of disordered eating; addiction; self-harm; being unhoused

or homeless; being overly represented in the carceral/prison system; and suicidal ideation, attempts, and death by suicide?

- What trauma informed practices could be helpful in the healing process for transracial adoptees?

Future research should also focus on any gender disparities that may exist with respect to transracial adoption.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The first policy recommendation is that all transracial adoptions are discontinued, whether within the United States or internationally. In its place, as a trauma informed practice and for the sake of the child(ren) involved, prospective adopters should instead explore non-transracial legal guardianship which is a legal arrangement that may be temporary or permanent allowing someone other than a child's biological parents to make decisions on behalf of the child (Kaldwell, 2019). Doing so would allow the child's parent(s) to retain parental rights, keep the child(ren)'s medical records open, allow the child(ren) to keep their surname, and ensure they are placed with a person or people with the same race/ethnicity as them (Rushton & Minnis, 1997). Put simply, transracial adoption should be abolished entirely because it is not trauma informed and it permanently legalizes family loss as parental rights are terminated and the child is permanently removed from their biological parent(s)' custody and placed in a new home (Kaldwell, 2019). It is possible that legal guardianship, a more trauma informed option, would have made a difference for Jae, a survey respondent who reported, "I was born one person in South Korea and four months later that person was erased, and another person replaced her in Minnesota. None of it was with my choice or consent." Erasure is a sentiment that was mentioned by more than a few respondents which was traumatic and caused significant harm and pain. Through legal guardianship, she might have had at least one Korean person as a legal guardian which would mean that her medical records and familial information would be available (Kaldwell, 2019). Moreover, she would also retain her surname, and likely cultural background including language, food, customs, and traditions.

The second policy recommendation, an appropriate complement to non-transracial legal guardianship, is prioritizing wraparound services that can connect transracial adoptees with trauma informed therapists; mentors of the same race/ethnicity to provide racial mirroring which can aid in identity formation; and safe, brave, and courageous spaces in which they are centered and not asked to perform emotional labor so that others, in a position to provide support, are learning of the impact of their transracial adoptions from transracial adoptees themselves (Ahn, 2020; Kim 2022). This supportive service should be of no cost to the adoptees (Brodzinsky et al., 2022; Kim, 2022).

I have trauma from being relinquished and adopted, from sleeping issues to eating issues. My anxiety is so high I don't know what it's like to function at a normal level. I have attachment issues and a severe fear of abandonment and rejection which have all affected relationships in my life, romantic and platonic. I have low self-esteem and worth. I have identity issues and suffer from imposter syndrome. I have ADHD which is likely compounded from my trauma. (Jae,⁶ woman transracial adoptee from South Korea, age 31-35)

⁶ This name is a pseudonym.

In this case, trauma informed wraparound supportive services including therapy would have been helpful.

A third recommendation is that adopters who have already adopted transracially must undergo ongoing psychological evaluations including criminal background checks to ensure that they are on neither sex offender registries nor intimate partner (also called domestic violence) registries. If they are embarking on transracial adoption as a result of infertility, they need to deal with their grief, loss, and trauma with respect to their infertility. As they move forward with expanding their families through adoption, many adopters look to transracial and transnational adoption as a way to gain access to a child when they have not successfully passed home studies in the United States. Adopters also need to actively participate in ongoing training on biases, cultural humility, and microaggressions, in addition to participating in family therapy with a trauma informed therapist. Further, if they haven't already, adopters need to cultivate relationships with others of the same race/ethnicity of their child(ren) so that their child(ren) are able to experience racial mirroring to mitigate the harm caused by transracial adoptions. They need to allow the child(ren) in their care to explore their culture, they need to dismantle the "colorblind" narrative in their hearts and homes and understand and prioritize diversity for the transracial adoptee in their lives, even if it means that they need to move to a more diverse city (Abrahamson, 2023). This recommendation is supported by Vonk (2001) who stated, "...racial awareness for TRA⁷ parents involves becoming sensitized to racism and discrimination. Several authors spoke to the need for TRA parents to examine their own attitudes and beliefs about their child's race and culture" (Vonk, 2001, p. 250). With this recommendation, social workers can continue to be involved with these families. Roberts (2022) thoroughly and intelligently guides readers through the system of family policing and provides evidence of how families of origin are often surveilled by the state under the pretext of "child welfare" (p. 125-132). If transracial adoption has already occurred it is the collective responsibility of social workers, child advocacy groups, and larger societal and governmental entities to protect the child(ren). It is imperative this shift happens so children are safe and not in homes with physically, psychologically, mentally, or emotionally abusive adopters (Laybourn & Goar, 2020; Ortiz, 2018; Roberts, 2022). This might have saved the six Black and mixed-race children—Markis (19), Hannah (16), Devonte (15), Jeremiah (14), Abigail (14), and Ciera (12)—in the care of a white lesbian couple who purported to be caring, progressive mothers (Levinson, 2018; Smiley, 2018; Walsh, 2018). In reality, it had been documented that they were abusing the children in their care, in plain sight and, in two different states starting in Minnesota then to Oregon before traveling to California, where the couple murdered the children by driving their SUV over a cliff (Levinson, 2018; Smiley, 2018; Walsh, 2018). There may still be a chance for other BIPOC children in the care of white adopters.

A fourth, and final, policy intervention is that transracial adoptees often do not have access to their medical records because adoption not only terminates the parental rights of biological parents, it also seals access to their original birth certificates (Baker, 2015). As anyone who has had concerns related to their physical or mental health would say, this is concerning and dire. Moreover, some transracial adoptees who are also transnational adoptees have found out that their adopters did not complete paperwork for their citizenship in the country in which they grew up and currently live, so

⁷ TRA stands for transracial adoptee. Contextually in this sentence it is unfortunately centering the adopter and means transracial adoptive.

they are now at risk of deportation, oftentimes to a country they have never known (Bellware, 2015; Kwaitkowski, 2021; OnlyBlackGirl, 2017; Simons, 2019; Starr, 2015). This underscores the need for transracial adoptees to have access to U.S. citizenship when brought to the United States, without their consent, from another country.

CONCLUSION

This research has also highlighted that many transracial adult adoptees have found community having connected with other transracial adult adoptees. They have formed a movement on the continuum of adoption from anti-adoption to a grayer area as well as embarked on coalition building (Mundt et al., 2018; Westerman, 2021). Though many transracial adoptees struggle and have been candid about their struggles, it is encouraging to know that they are not only finding one another, but their voices, and ways to advocate for themselves and others who are ensnared by this system, a system that fails to protect the most vulnerable, marginalized, and underestimated. Despite this, the narrative that used to be a foregone conclusion—that transracial adoptees ought to be “grateful” and “feel lucky”—is rapidly changing and becoming the truth of many transracial adoptees lived experiences—that grief, trauma, and loss guide their paths even if they have been successful in navigating their adoptions.

AUTHOR NOTE

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