The Experience and Understanding of Racial Difference in Families Among Adults of Color Adopted by White Parents

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ABSTRACT

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The notion of normality in families is socially constructed. In fact, so-called traditional families represent only 3% of households in the United States. The presence of dissimilarity in families has given rise to a deficit model, where families constructed outside of the norm are recognized as vulnerable to problems and likely candidates for intervention. At the same time, mental health practitioners indicate feeling unequipped to address the concerns of these families. Rather than assume nontraditional families are destined for maladaptive outcomes, research must investigate how family members address differences to produce strong, high functioning families. As such, the purpose of this qualitative investigation was to a) identify what transracially adopted individuals think and feel about their own race and the race of their parents/other adoptive family members, b) understand how racial differences are addressed in families formed through transracial adoption, and c) elucidate how transracially adopted individuals are affected (in childhood and adulthood) by ways in which their parents address or do not address issues of race with them.

Data was collected through 13 semi-structured interviews with adults of color who were transracially adopted by White parents. Participant narratives were transcribed and then analyzed using Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR). Results illustrate the complexity of identity formation and parent/child relationships in the lives of transracial adoptees. Racial messages received from family members and communities are identified, including themes of
colorblindness, racial discrimination, and having no sense of belonging. Participants described various ways in which they dealt with race-related messages on their own, through methods of isolation and avoidance. They also discussed negative emotional responses to race-related encounters, such as confusion, anger, and anxiety. Participants’ experiences of their own racial identity, as well as their relationship to their birth race and culture, are described. Suggestions for prospective White transracial adoptive parents are made, including the importance of incorporating adoptees’ birth race and culture within family life. Finally, implications for mental health practitioners working with transracial adoptive families, limitations, and suggestions for future research are provided.
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R.M.R.
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Chapter I

Introduction

Difference is a fundamental characteristic of human nature that is embodied in numerous realms such as cultural variation (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity), variation in experience (e.g., education, work, life events), and divergent belief systems (e.g., political orientations), among others. Cultural groups negotiate these differences that exist among human beings in distinct ways depending on the values and norms they endorse. In Western American culture, differences among people are managed through an emphasis on group conformity and sustained through social rules set forth for its people (Carter, 1995; Naylor, 1998). Those who acquiesce to the ideas of a group are permitted to stay in the group and benefit from the group’s power and teachings. Those who defy the standards or guidelines set forth by a group lose group membership and are not recipients of the group’s teachings. The Western notion of conformity at first seems contrary to the American cultural value of individualism. While Americans assert the importance of individualism, this occurs within a larger context of obligation to family and tradition (Stewart & Bennett, 1991). For example, children raised in Western culture are encouraged to heavily weight self-interest in their decision-making. However, the Western notion of individualism and self-expression has limits grounded in norms set forth by groups to which people belong, such as families.

Individualism only can exist within a larger context of group conformity and similarity, such that freedom within a group is constrained by one’s responsibilities to the group. If one was allowed unlimited individual freedom, there would be no assurances that groups would stay intact and uphold their values and traditions. Of the varying groups and social structures that organize human society, family is the most fundamental context in which children’s
development and socialization are influenced (McKie, Cunningham-Burley, & McKendrick, 2005; Pinderhughes & Harder, 2005). While individualism is valued within the family context, it is done so with the understanding that members will conform to certain rules and traditions established by other family members. As such, Western culture has deemed similarity a significant aspect of American family life, a vehicle through which culture and traditions are passed down to generations. In this way, family is a significant factor in the shaping of one’s identity. Families are presumed to have shared orientations, characteristics, and objectives on the basis that these shared factors will lead to a common purpose and bonds among family members (McKie, Cunningham-Burley, & McKendrick, 2005). Perhaps the greatest substantiation of the value placed on similarity in families is reflected in Western society’s notion of the traditional family as the most favorable family unit.

The “Traditional” Family

The “traditional family” consists of a husband and a wife who raise their biological children together. Traditional families are assumed to maximize similarities among family members and minimize the differences that exist. Further, the notion of traditional families often includes the assumption that the husband will serve as the economic provider while the wife will primarily be responsible for the childrearing. However, despite the emphasis placed on the notion of what is “traditional” in the rhetoric on families, family is a social category that is and has been flexible in its compositions and boundaries. Although contemporary Western society understands the traditional family as normative and most adaptive for all people, the idea of the traditional family is relatively recent and does not reflect centuries of history regarding family organization and roles nor does it attend to the country’s growing racially and culturally diverse landscape (Lamb, 1999). Social science’s view of the traditional family stemmed from a focus
on White middle-class two-parent American families and ignored what was normative for families of other races, ethnicities, and classes. Further, literature asserting the normality of the traditional family discounts generations of families where alternative types of familial organizations were the norm. For example, prior to the industrial revolution, most parents shared childrearing responsibilities since men’s places of employment tended to be close to home. Even when there was a shift from subsistence economy to a monetary economy, both mothers and fathers tended to participate in the workforce. In fact, it was not until the 20th century when it became unnecessary for some women to work that the single-earner role of father emerged as a salient component of the traditional family (Lamb, 1999). Nevertheless, the single-earner role of the father in families is what has emerged in society as preferable and normative. Regardless of how history has shaped family arrangements, as the concept of the ideal traditional family emerged in contemporary society, all other families of varying arrangements were presumed to provide a poor context for family stability and functioning.

History informs us that Western society has even forced particular types of similarity within families through laws preventing difference to exist. For example, prior to 1967, 16 states still deemed it unlawful to marry outside one’s racial group (Jacoby, 2001). Laws existed prohibiting interracial unions and, thus, diminished the numbers of families comprised of different races. Beyond race, individuals are commonly encouraged to find life partners who share the same class and religion. In fact, dating outside of one’s race, religion, or class is often discouraged or even forbidden by family members as it is considered “violating the rules” (Nash, 1997, p. 8). Similarity among romantic partners, especially in the form of comparable emotional reactions to events, is thought to increase understanding between partners and solidarity in interpretations and responses to events (Anderson & Keltner, 2004). As such, dissimilarity in
families is thought to interrupt the passing of common ideas and values and, as a result, have a detrimental effect on family members.

The presence of dissimilarity in families has given rise to a deficit model, where families constructed outside of the norm are recognized as vulnerable to problems and likely candidates for intervention (McKie, Cunningham-Burley, & McKendrick, 2005). These alternatives to the traditional family have become known as nontraditional families and have become the topic of much modern-day scrutiny.

Types of Nontraditional Families

Nontraditional families encompass all families whose composition deviates from the notion of the traditional intact two-parent biological family. They include, but are not limited to, dual-earner families in which both women and men have part-time or full-time employment, stepparent families, divorced families, families with gay and lesbian parents, and interracial families (i.e., parents of different races and their biological biracial children). These types of families have become more prevalent in the United States throughout the past several decades and have simultaneously become the focus of much research in an attempt to unpack the effect of difference on family members (Walsh, 2003). Difference in nontraditional families can be represented through gender roles (single-earner versus dual-earner families), structural arrangement (single-parent and divorced families), biological ties (stepparent families), or race (interracial families).

Differences also can arise from an attempt to satisfy a cultural norm or value. Embedded in the notion of traditional families is the idea that people engage in romantic relationships and marry in order to have children and build families. The ideology of marriage and family suggests that getting married and reproducing will promote well-being and happiness (Carr,
This pro-family Westernized cultural worldview likely influences individuals who are unable to have children of their own to build families through means other than reproduction. Thus, in an attempt to satisfy cultural expectations to pass one’s legacy onto others, many people who are unable to do so biologically choose to pursue adoption. Adoption creates families in which dissimilarities exist between generations (i.e., between parents and children). Oftentimes in adoption the economic, social, racial, and cultural backgrounds of children’s birth families differ significantly from that of their adoptive families. Such differences create complexities in the negotiation of identities within the family context.

While factors contributing to the families’ nontraditional nature differ, there are some commonalities across the literature. First, research and statistics show that nontraditional families, in their frequency rates, are not the exception but the norm (Walsh, 2003). Most people are a member of what is commonly referred to as a nontraditional family. Further, although there is a social stigma attached to nontraditional families suggesting they are maladaptive (Siebert, Ganong, Hagemann, & Coleman, 1986), there is no agreement among research findings to support this notion. Rather, findings are inconsistent and show that identifying nontraditional families as altogether less adaptive than traditional families does not accurately depict the experience of those raised in nontraditional family arrangements. Additional research is warranted to systematically unpack the complexities of these families in order to understand how parents and children can best address family difference to lead to the most adaptive outcomes.

The impact of difference in families is best investigated in families who embody the most salient types of difference. Upon reviewing the discourse on nontraditional families, it appears that biological ties and race are two of the most significant differences present among today’s nontraditional families, particularly those that have been examined in the literature. Only one
type of nontraditional family exemplifies both of these differences—those families where parents adopt their children transracially. These families, where parents adopt a child whose race is different than their own, are affected not only by the difference in their biology but also by their diverse racial backgrounds. As such, the present study will examine families formed through transracial adoption in order to learn how family members understand their differences and how these differences affect their familial relationships and perceptions of themselves.

As with other types of nontraditional families, transracial adoption is often seen as a maladaptive family arrangement. Adoptive children raised in these types of families have been shown to have lower levels of self-esteem (e.g., Lanz et al., 1990) and greater levels of psychological maladjustment (Weinberg et al., 2004). They also have been shown to experience more discomfort and negative feelings regarding their race-identification (e.g., McRoy et al., 1982). However, for every study implying that racial and biological differences in these families lead to harmful outcomes, there are additional studies (e.g., Juffer and IJzendoorn, 2007; Vroegh, 1997) suggesting families formed through transracial adoption are not negatively influenced by the differences characterizing them. As such, it appears that the psychological outcomes of transracially adopted children cannot be sufficiently described in the context of either/or thinking (i.e., either they have poor psychological development or they do not). Similarly, ways in which these families address issues of difference seem to be more complicated than dualistic thinking (i.e., yes they address difference or no they do not) allows. In the present study, the various ways in which families formed through transracial adoption address racial difference was investigated through an approach that allowed transracial adoptees to describe their experience rather than quantify it. This study departs from the typical dichotomous thinking that has become the hallmark of research with transracially adoptive families (i.e., transracial adoption
has either a positive or negative impact on adoptees) by allowing transracial adoptees to speak to both the challenging and rewarding aspects of being different from their family members. By allowing transracially adopted persons to tell their own stories, this study sought to “plumb the depths of experience [of family difference] to glean meanings that are not otherwise observable and that cannot be gathered using survey or other data-gathering strategies” (Morrow, 2007, p. 211). It is the hope of this researcher that a more in-depth exploration into the lives of adult transracial adoptees sheds light on the complex ways in which these families deal with family difference and reveals variables that more accurately represent their experiences.
Chapter II

A Review of the Literature

It is important to note that the notion of normality in families is socially constructed (Walsh, 2003). In fact, traditional families represent only 3% of households in the United States (McGoldrick, 1998). Thus, the idea of a standard of normality among families creates a superficial boundary for identifying that which is adaptive and that which is maladaptive for family members. Rather than assume nontraditional families are destined for maladaptive outcomes, research must investigate how family members address differences to produce strong, high functioning families. In recent decades, nontraditional families, as a population, have become more prevalent in psychological investigations as researchers have sought to understand the impact of difference in these families (i.e., aspects that distinguish them from traditional families) on its members.

Literature addressing the impact of difference in nontraditional family units on family members will first be reviewed in the context of family types that embody one salient difference and have been the focus of more substantial research (i.e., dual-earner families, divorced families, stepparent families, and multiracial families). Next, the need for more exploration into transracially adoptive nontraditional families (families different in both biology and race) will be highlighted. The history of transracial adoption and limited theories proposed about adoption and racial/cultural factors will be reviewed in order to provide a framework for the literature that has been conducted on this type of nontraditional family. This literature will be reviewed and critiqued and then, finally, the gaps in the literature and purpose of the current research will be explained.
Nontraditional Families: Dual-earner, Divorced, Stepparent, Multiracial

Many studies investigating family difference have focused on the role of family earning (single-parent versus dual-parent employment). The U.S. Department of Labor (1991) reported that the majority of mothers in the United States were in the labor force in 1990. Further, the proportion of single-earner families decreased from 61% to 25% from 1960 to 1990 while the proportion of dual-earner families increased from 36% to 61% from 1970 to 1990 (U.S. Department of Labor, 1991). A more recent report from the U.S. Bureau of the Census indicates that rates of dual-earner employment have remained relatively stable from 1990 to 2000, citing 64.2% of married couples with children under the age of 18 as dual earners. The National Study of the Changing Workforce reveals a higher percentage of dual-earners, citing 78% of families with both parents in the workforce (Bond et al., 1998). Research (e.g., Barnett & Gareis, 2007; Hochschild, 1997; Strazdins et al., 2004) aimed at understanding the impact of dual-earner roles on family members is inconsistent and seems to indicate that the impact for the family is dependent on specific factors (e.g., whether earners work nonstandard hours). In addition to dual-earner families, other types of nontraditional families have yielded inconsistent findings around family and child well-being.

Divorced and step-parent families are common in today’s society. While approximately one million divorces are granted each year, about half are for couples who have children (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998). In the United States, approximately 40% of all children have endured a parental divorce, thus disproving that intact families are the “norm.” Researchers have sought to understand the impact of divorce on both adult adjustment and child outcomes. As with studies on dual-earner families, findings with divorced families are complex. Some research indicates poor outcomes for adults who have divorced, such as increased admission
rates into inpatient and outpatient psychiatric clinics (e.g., Greene et al., 2003) and decreased psychological well-being (e.g., Marks & Lambert, 2002). As for child outcomes, some research suggests that marital dissolution predicts lower levels of psychological well-being for children even as they progress into adulthood. Amato and Sobolweski (2001) found that the relationship between divorce and psychological outcomes for children was mediated by the quality of parent-child relations post-divorce. Other studies, however, have found that adults report greater levels of autonomy and overall happiness following divorce (Hetherington, 1993) and that the majority of children impacted by divorce do not experience serious difficulties (Greene et al., 2003).

Rates of remarriage are approximately 65% for women and 75% for men. Further, approximately one-third of American children are part of a step-parent blended family. Stepparent families are those where the child is biologically related to only one of the parenting adults. Compared to first-marriage families, children of stepfamilies have been found to exhibit more emotional and behavioral problems and lower academic achievement (Amato, 1994). Such emotional and behavioral problems may result from stress caused by society’s negative attitudes towards these types of families and prompt individuals in stepparent families to seek psychological help (Kompara, 1980). Research on stepparent families points to differences in gender of step-parents and age of children as factors contributing to stress stemming from the family arrangement. Stepfamilies comprised of a stepfather seem to undergo less stress than those that comprise a stepmother, especially when the children involved are younger (Hetherington, 1993). Further, girls seem to undergo more stress in stepmother families than do boys (Nielson, 1999). Until recently, no studies of stepfamilies have included race as a variable. One study (Bryant, Coleman, & Ganong, 1988) has investigated stereotypes of stepfamilies based on the race of the family. Findings revealed that White stepfamilies were viewed more
negatively than Black stepfamilies. Authors suggest these findings speak to the shifting standards upheld by individuals regarding family functioning in various races. In addition to families comprised of varying configurations (families of divorce and stepparent families), families comprised of different races also are subject to the negative judgments directed at nontraditional families.

From 1960 to 1990, the number of interracial marriages in the United States increased from 150,000 to 1.6 million (Jacoby, 2001). Approximately 13% of marriages in the United States include persons of different races, yet percentages differ according to race. Interracial marriage rates for Asians and Latinos are nearly three times that of Blacks and five times that of Whites (Bean & Stevens, 2003). By the late 1990s, more than 30% of Asian or Latino individuals had spouses of another race (most often White). Such changes have caused a considerable increase in the biracial population of the United States. According to the 2000 Census, there are nearly 7 million self-identified biracial and multiracial people (Jones & Smith, 2001). Outcome studies investigating the impact of interracial families on biracial youth have included measures such as self-esteem. Studies assessing the self-esteem of biracial youth are inconsistent; some purport no differences in self-esteem between monoracial and biracial youth (e.g., Phiney & Alipuria, 1996) and between biracial youth with various identities (e.g., Suzuki-Crumly & Hyers, 2004). Other research (e.g., Bracey et al., 2004) has revealed contrary findings, suggesting that a biracial identity contributes to a lower self-esteem.

While some researchers have focused on certain nontraditional families (e.g., dual-earner and divorced families) to challenge prior evidence asserting they are harmful, other types of nontraditional families (e.g., interracial adoptive families) remain largely unexplored and under-researched. Interracial adoptive families comprise parents who adopt outside of their race
(transracially) and their adoptive children. Some of these families also may include biological children who share the same race as their parents. Transracially adoptive families can be formed either through domestic adoption (adoption of a child by a family within the child’s birth country) or international adoption (adoption of a child by a family outside of the child’s birth country). Literature addressing the mental health needs of individuals in families formed through adoption, in general, and transracial adoption, in particular, provides overall evidence for the impact of difference in these families by pointing to the substantial number of children who seek mental health services.

**Transracial Adoption and Mental Health**

For decades, adoption theorists have attempted to call attention to the unique challenges faced by all adoption triad members (i.e., adopted persons, birth parents, and adoptive parents). In 1999, Silverstein and Roszia outlined seven core issues of adoption, including loss, rejection, guilt/shame, grief, identity, intimacy and relationships, and control/gains. These issues affect all members of the adoption triad in unique ways and are often exacerbated in transracially adoptive families, when differences in race and culture within the family may add complexities to these core issues. Adoption is seen as a lifelong process grounded in deeply-rooted emotional issues, issues which lead to satisfaction, distress, or both in the lives of adoption triad members. Most members of adoption triads who seek counseling services do so with a focus on their adoptive status and the meaning that status brings to their lives (Porch, 2007).

Studies (e.g., Miller et al., 2000) have shown that there are a disproportionate number of transracial adoptees seeking therapeutic services. Rates of adolescent adoptees involved in psychotherapeutic treatments far outweigh the percentages of adolescent adoptees in the United States. In fact, as compared to the approximately 2 to 3% of adolescents in the United States
who are adopted, research reviews have determined that anywhere from 5 to 17% of adopted youth receive therapeutic treatment (Haugaard, 1998). Further, in a sample of 20,745 adolescents in grades 7 through 12, taken from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, adoption status was a significant contributor to participation in mental health services even when presenting problems and demographics variables were controlled for (Miller et al., 2000). Despite the challenges faced by adoptive persons and their families, strikingly little attention has been paid to this population in the mental health community.

Although a greater percentage of the United States population consists of adopted persons (2%) than persons with autism (.05%; Yeargin-Allsopp et al., 2003) or schizophrenia (07%; Kessler et al., 1994), adoption remains an unaddressed topic in mental health settings, both in the academic and practice realms (Henderson, 2007). Findings from a survey of 210 licensed psychologists, taken from the National Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology, indicated that 90% of respondents felt they needed more education about adoption (Sass & Henderson, 2007). Less than one-third of the sample stated they felt well prepared or very well prepared to treat individuals whose presenting concerns involve adoption-related issues. And two-thirds of the respondents reported that there was no mention of adoption in any of their graduate school courses. Just as professionals seem dissatisfied with the lack of competence regarding adoption issues within the mental health field, so too are members of adoptive families (Henderson, Sass, & Carlson, 2007). Members of adoption support groups often express disappointment in counselors’ lack of knowledge about adoption or minimization of the connection of adoption to their presenting concerns (Sass & Henderson, 2007).

Counselors also can have a significant impact on transracial adoptees, in part through their attitudes toward transracial placements in general. Fenster (2002) assessed the attitudes
toward transracial adoption in a large, national sample of social workers. Results revealed that Black social workers maintained relatively negative attitudes toward transracial adoption while White social workers’ attitudes were significantly more positive. Additional t-tests revealed that the Black social workers with the most negative perceptions of transracial adoptions were members of the National Association of Black Social Workers (the organization that publicly spoke out against this type of adoption in the 1970s). In light of the growing population of adoptive families, it is increasingly important that counselors become trained in adoption issues such that they may identify and work through their biases and competently meet the needs of the adopted children and families in their caseloads. The lack of understanding about and negative attitudes towards families of transracial adoption among mental health practitioners parallels that of American society. A brief look at the history of formalized adoptions reveals the recency with which American society acknowledged these transracial adoptive families by legalizing the practice of transracial adoption.

**An Historical Perspective of Transracial Adoptions**

During the 19th century, adoption placements were made primarily based on the consideration of matching as many traits as possible between parents and child. Such traits included physical appearance, religion and spirituality, cultural background, and potential talents (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2008). Placing children in the care of parents outside of their own race was illegal in most states during this time. Policy changes throughout the past several decades have changed the face of adoption, permitting more transracial in-country and international adoptions. It was not until the mid-20th century, when the civil rights movement began to alter societal impressions of racial relationships, that formalized transracial adoptions increased in prevalence.
Large numbers of interracial placements began in the 1940s with a growing prevalence of international adoptions. During this time, many American soldiers and their spouses adopted children from Asian countries that had been devastated by war (Silverman, 1993). For example, approximately 3,000 Japanese children and 840 Chinese children were adopted by Americans from 1948 to 1962. Following the Korean War, numbers of Korean adoptions escalated with approximately 38,000 adoptions of Korean children taking place from 1953-1981 (Weil, 1984). Many of these children were the product of relationships American soldiers had with Asian women in the countries in which they were fighting and where these children born out of wedlock were not accepted. Although international adoptions do not necessarily create interracial families, the majority of international adoptions, approximately 68%, are transracial (Child Welfare League of America, 2003).

Adoptions of Black children by White parents were not as prevalent during the 1940s and 1950s, but grew in number during the 1960s. In fact, most public and private agencies did not provide foster or adoptive placements for African American children until the 1960s. During this time, specific agencies such as New York’s Harlem-Dowling agency was created to serve African American children (Pinderhughes & Harden, 2005). In 1971, though, there were approximately 2,500 transracial adoptions of Black children by White parents. At the height of transracial adoptions, Black social workers began to question the well-being of Black children adopted into White families and, in 1972, took strong opposition to transracial adoption practice. The National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) feared that Black children raised in White families would not receive the necessary exposure to Black culture, Black pride, and Black self-concept, in order to fully develop a secure and healthy sense of self (Silverman,
As a result, transracial adoptions with Black children decreased throughout the 1970s while transracial adoptions with Asian and Latino children steadily rose.

Due to the disproportionate number of children of color in the foster care system, and the prevalence of White parents looking to adopt, legislation was passed in 1994 to encourage the practice of domestic transracial adoption. The Multi-Ethnic Placement Act stated that placement agencies could not delay an adoption based solely on factors of race (Hollinger, 1998). When agencies still did not follow this act, it was reinforced in 1996 with the Removal of Barriers to Interethnic Adoption Act (IEPA) and again in 1997 with the Adoption and Safe Families Act (Brooks, Barth, Bussiere, & Patterson, 1999). The IEPA clearly prohibited any federally-funded adoption agency from even considering race in making decisions regarding the placement of children with foster or adoptive parents (Evan B. Donaldson Institute, 2008). Failure to comply with this stipulation is considered a violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act and seen as a form of discrimination.

**Current Adoption Trends**

Since these legal shifts, the number of interracial families formed by transracial adoption has again increased. In 2001, African American, Asian American, Hispanic, and Native American children made up 60% of children waiting to be adopted from foster care (Lee, 2003). Black children represent a particularly large portion of children of color waiting to be adopted and are less likely than children of other races to move to a permanent placement in a timely manner (Evan B. Donaldson Institute, 2008). Of the 49,161 children adopted from the public child welfare system in 2005, 14,524 of them were Black (Child Welfare League of America, 2007). Further, in 2006, while 15% of children living in the United States were Black, Black children made up 32% of children in foster care placements (Evan B. Donaldson Institute, 2008).
As there are racial differences in the number of children waiting to be adopted from foster care, there also are differences in the races of parents adopting these children. In 2004, 18% of African American children were adopted domestically by parent(s) of a different race. This figure can be compared with the 5% of White children adopted by parents of a different race in the same year (Child Welfare League of America, 2006).

As with domestic adoptions, international adoptions also have increased in the recent years. Approximately 21,698 children were adopted internationally in 2006, an increase from the 6,536 international adoptions that took place in 2001 (U.S. Department of State, 2006). From 1991 to 2007, there was a 180% increase in the number of intercountry adoptions that took place in the United States (Child Welfare League of America, 2007).

**Recent Legislation**

The rights of children adopted internationally by families in the United States have been protected by the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption since 1994, when the Convention was signed by the US government. In 2000, Congress passed bills for the implementation of the Convention, termed the Intercountry Adoption Act, and as recently as April 2008, the Convention was ratified in the United States (Evan B. Donaldson Institute, 2008). The Hague Convention governs intercountry adoptions between the United States and nearly 75 other countries and requires adoption service providers to give prospective adoptive parents at least ten hours of training on issues such as attachment, culture, and health of orphans prior to the adoption taking place.

Although this Convention is a starting point from which adoption placement agencies can begin addressing the impact of racial and cultural differences in transracial adoptive families formed through international adoptions, there is a considerable lack of guidelines for preparing
families to negotiate these differences. The Hague Convention requires 10 hours of training for pre-adoptive parents but ignores the need for ongoing services to address the lifelong unique challenges transracially adopted families will face. Moreover, there is no federal legislation pertaining to domestic transracial adoptions that require pre-adoptive parents to consider issues of race and culture prior to or following the adoption of their child. In fact, as indicated earlier, legislation around domestic adoptions prevents service providers from considering race as a factor that may influence their decision to find the most suitable home for pre-adoptive children.

From a legal standpoint, therefore, the United States has advocated for a colorblind approach to making domestic transracial adoption placements (i.e., an approach rooted in attitudes denying the social significance of race and dismissing the power of contemporary racism; Gushue, 2004). Such an approach dismisses the impact that race has on transracially adoptive families and, moreover, may pathologize any emotional or identity struggles encountered by these families due to their interracial status. The following section will present theories scholars have derived as a framework for understanding the impact of race and culture on transracially adoptive families.

**Theoretical Perspectives of Transracial Adoption**

The negotiation of differences in transracially adoptive families has been primarily understood through conceptual frameworks developed to understand all adoptive families. Initially, theorists presented frameworks to describe diverse parenting styles in adoptive families. More recently, scholars have proposed theoretical models to address the various identity statuses of adopted persons, including one model pertaining specifically to transracial adoptees. Each of the conceptual frameworks provides a base from which researchers have examined the roles and attitudes of parents and children in families formed by transracial adoption. Perhaps the most
fundamental of these frameworks is Kirk’s (1964) social role theory of adoption adjustment. Kirk suggested that there are unique tasks, challenges, and conflicts present in adoptive families that do not exist in non-adoptive families. This author posited that adoptive parents can deal with these unique differences in one of two ways, by disregarding differences (termed rejection-of-difference behavior) or by openly addressing differences with their children (termed acknowledgement-of-difference behavior). Kirk’s model suggests a linear relationship such that rejection-of-difference behavior is associated with maladjustment and lower levels of self-esteem in adoptees while acknowledgement-of-difference behavior is associated with positive adjustment and higher levels of self-esteem.

Building from Kirk’s model, Brodzinsky (1987) suggested parents may employ one of three coping styles in dealing with challenges that arise pertaining to transracial adoption. In addition to Kirk’s rejection-of-difference and acknowledgement-of-difference styles, Brodzinsky asserted a third style he termed insistence-of-difference. While Kirk’s model was presented linearly, Brodzinsky posited a curvilinear relationship stating that parenting behaviors of either extreme nature (emphasizing and stressing differences or ignoring and discounting them) are harmful to the development of adopted children, whereas acknowledging differences without calling too much attention to them is ideal (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990).

More recently, theorists have put forth conceptual frameworks to explain various identities held by adopted persons. Grotevant (1997) described four different identities for adopted persons: unexamined identity, limited identity, unsettled identity, and integrated identity. An unexamined identity is one where an adoptee has not considered adoption issues at all, whereas a limited identity refers to an adoptee who has thought about adoption issues although does not consider them central to his life. An unsettled identity reflects an adopted person who
has thought a great deal about the meaning of adoption in his life and harbors some negative feelings as a result (e.g., anger or resentment towards birth or adoptive family members). Finally, an integrated identity is one that reflects a deep examination and resolution of adoption issues in the adoptee’s life. Grotevant et al. (2007) assert that these identities are fluid and that no one of them is necessarily more ideal than another. They suggest that particularly in adolescence, adoptees may fluctuate between any of the four identity statuses. Although this theory speaks toward identity statuses for both transracial and in-race adoptees, the various statuses can be used to understand the numerous ways in which transracial adoptees make sense of their race within a racially different family.

Other developmental theories have been used as a backdrop for understanding the experience of transracial adoptive families, such as the Adoptive Family Life Cycle (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999). This model is stage-oriented and based on family systems theory and stress and coping theory. Its basic tenets include dealing with issues of loss (e.g., infertility for adoptive parents and loss of birth family for adopted children), assimilating the adoptive child into the family culture, dealing with the understanding of what adoption means and the loss of being given up, and developing a sense of identity without the knowledge of or exposure to one’s own cultural birth heritage. This model does not purport an end or a final outcome; rather, it is conceptualized as a lifelong process. Building from ideas proposed by the Adoption Family Life Cycle theory, Frasch, Brooks, and Barth (2000) point out that racial differences within the family only exacerbate the challenges of developing a coherent sense of self, the loss of birth family members who represent adoptees’ culture, and the stigma (now visible) of being adopted. These authors stress the need for a holistic understanding of transracial adoption, one that looks at
children’s development in the context of their families and at the impact of family members on transracial adoptees’ negotiations of their multiple identities.

Acknowledging the need for a racial identity framework specific to transracial adoptees, Baden and Steward (2007; 2000) proposed the Cultural-Racial Identity Model. This model grew out of racial identity models previously developed for people of color (Cross & Strauss, 1998) and Whites (Helms, 1990). Racial identity encompasses the attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors an individual has towards one’s own racial group and members outside one’s racial group (i.e., dominant or non-dominant groups; Carter, 1995). Racial identity models for both people of color and Whites include statuses that represent differing levels of maturity in one’s racial worldview and are formed in part by one’s family, community, and society. Studies (e.g., Carter, 1991; Munford, 1994) using these models have shown that the psychological adjustment of people may depend in some ways on their racial identity attitudes.

Baden and Steward (2007; 2000) purport that racial identity can and should be understood in three separate contexts: an intrapsychic context, the family environment, and an extra-familial context. This model takes into account the two different cultures and races that exist in any transracial adoptive family, the culture and race of the adoptee and the culture and race of the adoptive family. Adopted persons’ racial identities are determined by where they fall on two axes: their adoptive parent’s race axis and their birth family’s race axis. Thus, an adopted person may have one of four racial identities, a pro-self racial identity (identifying with one’s own race and not the race of one’s parents), a biracial identity (identifying with both one’s own race and the race of one’s parents), a racially undifferentiated identity (not identifying strongly with one’s own race or the race of one’s parents), or a pro-parent racial identity (identifying with one’s parents’ race but not one’s own race). Individuals with a pro-parent racial identity would
likely mirror those in the conformity status of the People of Color Racial Identity Model (Helms, 1995) while individuals with a pro-self racial identity would parallel those in the immersion or emersion racial identity statuses of the People of Color Racial Identity Model.

With the Baden and Steward model, adopted persons’ cultural identities are based on their adoptive family’s cultural axis and their birth family’s cultural axis resulting in a pro-self cultural identity (identifying with one’s own culture and not the culture of one’s parents), a bicultural identity (identifying with both one’s own culture and the culture of one’s parents), a culturally undifferentiated identity (not identifying strongly with one’s own culture or the culture of one’s parents), or a pro-parent cultural identity (identifying with one’s parents’ culture but not one’s own culture). The racial-cultural identity of adopted persons is represented by any one of the sixteen combinations resulting from the four possible racial identities and the four possible cultural identities. In their model, Baden and Steward acknowledge that transracially adopted person’s identities are influenced by their own race, as well as the race of their adopted parents. No theory exists, however, for understanding how a parent’s identity may be influenced not only in terms of their race but the race of their transracially adopted child.

Most of the empirical literature examining aspects of difference in transracially adoptive families (namely, race) strives to assess outcomes for transracial adoptees. As such, the focus of the literature seems to be on identifying the difference of race in this type of nontraditional family unit as harmful or not depending on transracially adopted children’s self-esteem, racial identity, and other psychological outcomes.
Impact of Transracial Adoption on Adoptees

Self-esteem/Self-image

There has been a trend in transracial adoption literature to examine self-esteem outcomes. In general, children from adoptive families have been shown to exhibit significantly lower self-esteem than those from intact families (i.e., non-adoptive and non-divorced families; Lanz, Iafrate, Rosnati, & Scabini, 1999). Lanz et al. (1999) sampled 160 adolescents from intact families, 140 from divorced/separated families, and 150 from intercountry adoptive families. The sample of transracial adoptees comprised those born in Latin American countries, Asian countries, or Eastern European countries. Lanz et al. also assessed parent-child communication among the three family typologies in their study and determined that adolescents in adoptive families reported better communication with their parents than their non-adopted peers. The authors explained this finding in light of adjustment problems that adopted adolescents experience, suggesting that positive parent-child communication may not be enough to compensate for any traumas that they may have experienced prior to adoption. However, parent-child communication was found to be unrelated to self-esteem among adoptee participants in their study. Thus, one is left to wonder what contributes to adoptees’ significantly lower levels of self-esteem if they report successful communication patterns with their parents. Perhaps the 20-item Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale (Barnes & Olsen, 1985) did not fully capture communication patterns between transracial adoptees and their parents, given that it does not specifically probe issues of race. It is possible that dialogue around differences in race, or a lack of dialogue around this topic, may be related to levels of self-esteem among transracial adoptees, as suggested by Kirk’s (1964) and Brodzinky’s (1987) models of transracial adoptee adjustment. This very notion is one that was explored in the present study.
When transracial adoptees are compared to their in-race adopted peers, findings regarding differences in self-esteem are not as apparent. Vroegh (1997) found no significant differences between in-race and transracially adopted children (Black children adopted by White parents) in her assessment of self-esteem among 52 adolescents. The participants of the study ranged in age from 16 to 19 years old. Most adolescents in this study, whether from transracial or monoracial families, evidenced “good” or “very good” levels of self-esteem according to the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. On a larger scale, Juffer and IJzendoorn (2007) conducted a meta-analysis including 18 studies addressing potential differences in self-esteem between transracial and in-race adopted persons. Adoptees from all age groups, childhood to adulthood, were included in the study. Their analysis revealed that among 2,198 adoptees across the various studies, there were no significant differences in self-esteem between the adopted persons. Research in this area, however, is inconsistent. An examination of data from 609 adoptees who participated in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health revealed significant differences in participants’ reported self-worth (Burrow & Finely, 2004). The self-worth scale (α=.78) used included four items (e.g., “You have a lot to be proud of”), responses to which were rated on a scale of 1 to 5. In this study, Black adoptees of both Black and White parents had significantly higher levels of self-worth than did White and Asian adoptees of White parents. Thus, there were no clear differences in self-esteem between in-race and transracially adopted groups. The authors were not able to derive an explanation for this pattern of results. These authors also examined the dependent variables of familial relationships and physical health and determined no differences between in-race adopted and transracially adopted groups. It is important to note that the only independent variable in this study was groups of adopted adolescents (e.g., in-race versus transracially adopted youth). Thus, even where group differences occurred, there was no
data or data analysis plan to offer an explanation for why such differences were found. In order to make sense of conflicting results regarding the self-esteem of transracially adopted individuals, it seems that research should aim to uncover factors they believe contribute to their own self-esteem. Thus, the unique impact of transracial adoption (and racial difference) on adoptees’ self-esteem remains unknown and warrants more research.

Self-esteem of transracial adopted children and adolescents also may be affected by their self-image (i.e., satisfaction with their physical appearance). Feigelman (2000) found that transracially adopted youth living in predominantly White communities were more uncomfortable with their appearance than those living in heterogeneous communities. Similarly, 46% of internationally adopted children in another study found their physical differences from their family members troubling and stated they wished they were White (Juffer, 2006). In both of these studies, however, data representing how transracially adopted youth feel about their appearance was collected from parents (Feigelman, 2000) or parents and teachers (Juffer, 2006), and not directly from adoptees. It is possible that parents are not fully aware of how their adopted children feel about their appearance and that data regarding self-image collected directly from adoptees would yield different results. The impact of being raised by adoptive parents of another race continues to be unclear even upon examining studies where researchers assessed other psychological outcomes for transracially adopted youth.

**Additional Psychological Outcomes**

Research has indicated that transracially adopted adolescents are more maladjusted than their non-adopted peers (Weinberg, Waldman, van Dulmen, & Scarr, 2004) and that maladjustment in transracial adoptees increases over time (DeBerry et al., 1996). Weinberg et al. (2004) reported that, among 240 children in 91 adoptive families, parents perceived their
transracially adopted children as more likely than non-adopted children to have school problems, behavior problems, general health problems, and delinquency problems (Weinberg et al., 2004). Further, Black children adopted transracially were rated by their parents as having more behavior problems than White children adopted by White parents. Given that data was collected via parent reports, it is possible the findings reflect biases held by parents about their children of color, as opposed to accurate impressions of their children’s behaviors. Meese (2005) examined internationally adopted children who had spent some time in an institutional setting in their birth country and determined that these children were at risk for delays in social-emotional, cognitive, and motor skills development.

Contrary to prevalent hypotheses, research also has shown that transracially adopted youth are just as well adjusted as same-race adopted youth and non-adopted youth. Transracial adoptees were found to be no more likely than in-race adoptees to run away from home or abuse drugs or alcohol. Furthermore, they were not rated as more dysfunctional or lower functioning (Feigelman, 2000). Burrow and Finley (2004) also found no evidence supporting the claim that transracially adopted adolescents suffer worse outcomes than their same-race adopted peers. Rather, transracial adopted adolescents revealed higher grades and had higher academic expectations than their same-race adopted peers.

In the studies cited regarding the psychological adjustment of transracial adoptees, not only are findings inconsistent (i.e., some show well-adjusted adoptees while others reveal poorly adjusted adoptees), sources of data differ as well. Most studies (e.g., Weinberg et al., 2004; Feigelman, 2000) have used parental reports as the basis for collecting data and some others have collected data directly from transracially adopted adolescents (e.g., Burrow & Finley, 2004; adolescents ages 12-19 years old). No studies, however, have inquired about psychological
adjustment from the perspective of adult transracial adoptees, even though this group has been speaking to this matter for years in personal stories and at conferences (e.g., John, 2005; Noerdlinger, 1996). Transracially adopted adults may provide the least biased and most meaningful and rich accounts of their own experience and adjustment. Given that the central difference apparent in families of transracial adoption is race, perhaps some of the most meaningful studies investigating the impact of this type of family on children are those examining youth’s racial identity.

**Adoptee Racial Identity**

Research on transracial adoption also reveals inconsistencies regarding the racial identity of transracially adopted youth. Simon, Alstein, and Melli (1994) conducted a 20-year longitudinal study from which they determined that Black transracial adoptees were comfortable with their racial identity at the time of adulthood. Data for this study also was collected through parent interviews; as a result, findings should not necessarily be taken to represent adoptees’ actual experiences. In their comparison study, Shireman and Johnson (1986) found insignificant differences between ways in which Black transracial and in-race adoptees viewed their racial identity. Participants in this study, however, were 8 years old. Thus, although there were no differences in racial identity based on the racial make-up of the families, one cannot assume that such differences would not have arisen as the children grew older.

In contrast to the previous two studies, some researchers (e.g., McRoy, Zurcher, Lauderdale, & Anderson, 1982) have uncovered differences in the racial identity of in-race adoptees as compared to transracial adoptees. In-race Black adoptees seemed to be more comfortable than transracial adoptees addressing issues of racial identity. McRoy and her colleagues (1982) found that African American children adopted by White parents had more
problems establishing a racial identity and felt more negatively about their race than did those
adopted intraracially. These researchers found that differences in racial identity were related to
the racial make-up of the communities in which the adoptees lived (e.g., predominantly Black
communities versus predominantly White communities) such that those living in predominantly
Black communities had a greater sense of racial identity.

It is crucial to note that the use of racial identity as a construct in this study (McRoy et
al., 1982) and many others involving transracial adoptees may be misleading, as the construct
has come to mean many things in the literature. Within the field of counseling psychology, the
term racial identity has come to represent attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors one has regarding his
membership to his racial group, as well as towards members of other racial groups (Carter,
1995). Racial identity often is understood as a developmental process, involving various statuses
of maturity regarding one’s worldview about race. McRoy and her colleagues (1982), however,
measured racial identity through inquiries static in time and not about a process over time. They
inquired about race self-identification (i.e., questions asking participants to identify the racial
group to which they belong) and attitudes about race (i.e., a limited number of questions asking
participants how they currently feel to be a part of their particular racial group). Furthermore,
the average age of the 60 child respondents in this study was thirteen. Thus, this study provides
only a cursory synopsis of youth’s attitudes about race and does not provide information about
how transracially adopted youth’s attitudes and thoughts regarding race change throughout
adolescence. The present study aimed to better describe the attitudes and thoughts transracially
adopted individuals have about their own race as well as the race of their parents. It also sought
to describe how these attitudes and thoughts changed over time.
Lee and Quintana (2005) investigated the role of community factors by including cultural exposure (i.e., exposure to one’s birth culture in the immediate and extended community) as a variable in their study. Cultural exposure was found to be an influential factor in transracially-adopted persons’ developmental course and perspective-taking ability, moreso than age or cultural knowledge. Lee and Quintana define perspective-taking ability as a progression of perspectives children take regarding their culture and race. The four perspectives include: physical (i.e., understanding race based on observable features), literal (i.e., understanding that ancestry determines racial status), social (i.e., understanding social consequences of racial group membership), and collective group consciousness (i.e., focusing on a psychological connection to other members of a racial group). These authors determined that actively exploring one’s culture of origin seems to be more strongly related to perspective-taking ability than indirect learning (i.e., cultural knowledge through books and stories, etc.). However, when levels of cultural exposure were controlled for in both groups, there was no significant difference in perspective-taking ability development between adopted and non-adopted children. In other words, cultural exposure mediates the relationship between perspective-taking ability development and status of adoption (transracially adopted or not) in Korean children. In addition, transracially-adopted children reach levels of perspective-taking ability development at older ages than non-adopted children. Authors suggested that these developmental differences stem from cultural exposure and that, if transracially adopted children received greater exposure to their culture of origin, these differences would decrease (Lee & Quintana, 2005).

Although this study empirically confirms the importance of cultural exposure, more research is needed to understand what constitutes this construct. Given that Lee and Quintana (2005) assessed cultural exposure through only six questions (e.g., Do you go to a Korean
school?, How often do you eat Korean food?), there are likely many facets to cultural exposure that were not addressed in this study. For example, the children in this study were not asked any questions regarding how their parents embraced Korean culture. The present study allowed participants to more broadly address the notion of cultural exposure with regard to racial differences.

Clearly, when examining the outcome variables among transracially adopted children and youth, the impact of difference is difficult to measure. Some studies (e.g., DeBerry et al., 1996; Lanz et al., 1999) suggest that youth are negatively affected by their family status while other studies provide evidence to the contrary (Burrow & Finley, 2004; Juffer & IJzendoorn, 2007). In an attempt to better understand the inconsistencies revealed in adoptees’ psychological characteristics, other research has addressed the role of parents in families formed through transracial adoption.

**Perception, Expectations, and Racial Socialization Behaviors of Parents who Transracially Adopt**

Adoption scholars (e.g., Wegar, 2000; Brodzinsky et al., 1998) have suggested that the failure to acknowledge the unique challenges, negative expectations, and prejudice associated with transracial adoptive families generates detrimental outcomes. However, before examining how parents address race post-adoption, it is important to consider what researchers have uncovered regarding attitudes of parents prior to adopting transracially. Jennings’ (2006) examination of White women’s intentions to adopt revealed that women who adopted transracially tended to do so after exhaustive efforts to adopt in-race. This qualitative study also determined that those who adopted transracially tended to have a colorblind perspective (i.e., the inaccurate belief that the world is just for all people) and not address issues of racism with their
children. Although this study focused specifically on women’s attitudes pre-adoption, it raises many questions regarding the effects of parents’ colorblind beliefs for children of color post-adoption.

Much research has examined the extent to which parents acknowledge the differences inherent in their adoptive families through the examination of cultural socialization processes. For example, family racial socialization has been associated with racial orientations in transracially adopted youth (DeBerry et al., 1996). DeBerry, Scarr, and Weinberg (1996) examined five forms of racial socialization and two types of identity orientations (i.e., Africentric Reference Group Orientation and Eurocentric Reference Group Orientation) in a sample of 85 Black and 3 Black/White biracial children with White adoptive parents. Reference Group Orientation was defined as awareness of racial issues, understanding of racial issues/differences, and use of appropriate behaviors across racial contexts. The study took place over a period of approximately 10 years. The five types of racial socialization consisted of denial/de-emphasis (i.e., denial or avoidance of racial issues), ambivalence (i.e., verbal homage to racial issues without subsequent behaviors), bicultural (i.e., verbal and behavioral attempts to address racial issues), multicultural (i.e., more emphasis on family and less on White parents raising children of color), and overenthused/overzealous (i.e., preoccupation with race).

Structured interview data indicated that 42% of parents held a bicultural perspective at Time 1 (adoptees at age 7) as compared to 20% at Time 2 (adoptees at age 17). At Time 2, 55% of parents stressed denial and 30% held ambivalent attitudes. Further, they found that Eurocentric Reference Group Orientation increased over the 10 year period but that Africentric Reference Group Orientation decreased. In addition, there was a consistently negative correlation between Africentric Reference Group Orientation and Eurocentric Reference Group
Orientation, indicating that transracial adoptees experience these orientations as incompatible. Findings also revealed that levels of psychological adjustment decreased among adoptees over the 10-year period. Path analyses indicated that during adolescence, family racial socialization predicted Africentric Reference Group Orientation but not Eurocentric Reference Group Orientation and that Africentric Reference Group Orientation (but not Eurocentric Reference Group Orientation) was correlated with personal identity. Thus, this study suggests that the Africentric Group Orientations of transracially adopted individuals are influenced by the attitudes and practices about race held by their adoptive parents. Moreover, Family Racial Socialization did not directly influence psychological adjustment but indirectly influenced it through its direct relationship to Reference Group Orientations. It seems that transracial adoptees whose parents did not address issues of race and who, subsequently, took on a more Eurocentric orientation, presented as more maladjusted during adolescence (DeBerry et al., 1996).

Although this study is fairly comprehensive in its attempt to connect parental beliefs and actions having to do with race with the beliefs, attitudes, and psychological adjustment of transracially adopted youth, the authors did not systematically address why parents’ racial socialization efforts decreased over time. Future research should examine in much greater detail the dynamics underlying parents’ decline in racial socialization behaviors.

Other scholars (e.g., Johnston et al., 2007; Yoon, 2001) also have found relationships among ethnic identity, cultural socialization, and psychological adjustment. In a sample of 241 adolescent Korean adoptees, cultural socialization predicted ethnic identity which then predicted psychological adjustment (Yoon, 2001). Johnston et al. (2007) sampled 193 White mothers of Korean and Chinese adopted persons and determined that higher levels of cultural socialization
corresponded to fewer externalizing behaviors among youth (i.e., aggressive behaviors). Examining characteristics of parents likely to engage in racial socialization parenting behaviors, Lee et al. (2006) determined that parents with less colorblind racial attitudes were more likely to participate in the racial socialization of their adopted children (e.g., encouraging children to participate in cultural activities, participating in adoption support groups, speaking with children about racism). These authors, collecting data from 761 parents of international adoptees ages 5 to 13, also found that racial socialization beliefs mediated the relationship between parents’ racial attitudes and their behaviors. As with other studies, however, these results must be interpreted with caution given the seemingly limited scope of the authors’ measure of racial socialization. Lee et al. (2006) assessed racial socialization by asking parents whether they had talked to their child about racism and discrimination in their school (yes-no format) or whether they had spoken to their child’s teacher about their adoption history (yes-no format). It seems the myriad ways parents may address race with their transracially adoptive children would be better captured through open-ended questions, as the present study has done.

In addition to parents’ socialization styles, Lanz (1999) conducted a study assessing the quality of parent-child communication in transracial adoptive families as compared to non-adoptive families. Adoptive adolescents reported more positive communication with their parents than their non-adopted peers. Authors suggested that additional tasks involved in developing parent-child relationships in adoptive families may require higher levels of communication. However, this study’s lack of comparison between adoptive groups (i.e., same-race and transracial adoptive families) limits the conclusions that can be drawn about the impact of transracial adoptive status on parent-child communication. Further, the study did not address
racial identity or racial socialization variables such that the impact these variables may have on parent-child communication remains unknown.

Literature also has pointed to varying expectations among transracially adoptive parents. In some cases, parents develop particular expectations based on the race of their adopted child while other studies have indicated some parents take a more colorblind approach in raising their child (Berquist, Campbell, & Unrau, 2003). One study found that transracial adoptees reported significantly higher levels of academic expectations than their in-race adopted peers, and Asian children adopted by White parents had the highest expectations of transracial groups (Burrow & Finley, 2004). Burrow and Finley suggested that White parents may impose expectations on their Asian children based on cultural stereotypes that Asian children will perform better in school.

In another study (Berquist et al., 2003), however, adoptive parents of Korean-born adoptees did not perceive racial distinctiveness in their children beyond physical appearance nor did they anticipate struggles based on race. Further, less than half believed their children identified as Korean or Asian, stating that their children identified more with being White and that their physical characteristics appeared less Korean over time. It seems that parents in this study minimized the salience of race, specifically the minority status of their adopted children. Parents seemed to conceptualize their family unit as “White with a Korean adoptee” as opposed to “biracial.”

Contrastingly, research (Rojewski, 2005) examining parents’ perceptions of the importance of their child’s birth culture among a sample of transracially adoptive parents of Chinese children revealed the value (or lack thereof) placed on integrating cultural heritage and exposure to Chinese culture in the lives of their children. There were no significant differences
in the importance parents placed on Chinese culture based on the age of their child, the
frequency with which parents addressed issues of culture with their adopted children, or the
structure of the family (i.e., a one or two-parent family). A modest statistical difference was
found between the interaction Chinese adoptees had with other Chinese adults in the community
as compared to other Chinese children. Adoptees had more interactions with other Chinese
adults than non-adopted Chinese children. Other studies have found that being surrounded by
either racially similar children (e.g., Friedlander, 1999; Okun, 1996) or racially similar adult role
models (e.g., Friedlander, 1999) led to the development of a more positive self-esteem.

Vonk et al. (2007) echoed the above results in their assertion that attitudes held by
transracially adoptive parents vary considerably. While some parents educate their children
about their birth cultures and racism, others reject cultural differences through taking on a
colorblind perspective. Further, when racial differences are acknowledged by adoptive parents,
the effects for children are not always positive. Parents who respond to racial difference based
on biases and stereotypes (e.g., Burrow & Finley, 2004) may engender harmful emotional
consequences for their children. Thus, it seems important researchers not only inquire about
whether issues of race and racial difference are addressed among family members but how they
are addressed (or avoided).

In order for parents to encourage transracial adoptees to explore and develop their own
personal identity apart from that of their family, some professionals have asserted the need for
racial awareness and cultural competence training for transracially adoptive parents. Vonk and
Angaran (2001) investigated the impact of a training program developed to increase transracially
adopting parents’ racial awareness, knowledge, and skills in order to promote increased racial
identity development, survival skills, and cultural knowledge among their transracially adopted
youth. Assessments of participants involved in the intervention revealed significant increases in each of the constructs examined (i.e., racial awareness, multicultural planning, and survival skills). These authors did not further assess for the effectiveness of the intervention by examining child outcomes after parents adopted transracially. Thus, there is no evidence to support that racial awareness training for transracial adoptive parents increased identity development and cultural knowledge in transracially adopted youth over time.

Within the research addressing the impact of difference in families formed through transracial adoption, a limited number of studies employ a descriptive or qualitative methodology, a lack of research paradigm variability that parallels the field of psychology as a whole. As psychological researchers have begun to embrace a more flexible agenda concerning research methodology, the resounding call for qualitative research rings particularly strong in the area of family difference and transracial adoptions.

**A Call for Qualitative Research**

Although most of the literature exploring the nature and impact of difference in families is quantitative in nature, there has been a call among various disciplines for more qualitative research investigations. Researchers and scholars alike have begun to recognize the capacity of qualitative research to address the appeals of the multicultural competency guidelines (American Psychological Association, 2003) by giving voice to marginalized people and challenging research rooted only in the experiences of socially dominant groups. Reflecting upon the paradigmatic shift toward qualitative research, Michelle Fine (2007) noted:

> When psychologists ask people to assess their experiences, expectations, identities, and desires, or to rate them on a scale, or when we observe their public behaviors, we cannot assume the material gathered is “free” from the insidious effects of
dominant ideologies. Instead, the data with which we work, regardless of how they are constructed and collected, cannot be presumed raw, uncontaminated, innocent, or authentic (p. 471).

More prevalent in anthropological, sociological, and educational disciplines, qualitative methods have become more accepted within the field of psychology, where researchers have realized its value in the exploration of variables that have not yet been identified or sufficiently operationalized (Morrow, 2007). Haverkamp, Morrow, and Ponterotto (2005) posit that qualitative research provides a picture of “what lies beneath” the surface of human experience (p. 124). A primary purpose of qualitative research is to answer the what and how of people’s own experiences (Creswell, 1998); that is, what constitutes and describes one’s experience and how they make meaning from it. When extant literature does not offer a sound basis from which hypotheses can be tested and theories can be verified, qualitative research provides investigators with a mechanism to generate theory and produce relevant hypotheses (Choudhuri, 2005; Ponterotto, 2005). Termed the “fifth force in psychology” (Ponterotto, 2002, p. 394), researchers in the field of psychology recognize the necessity of qualitative research to understanding the worldviews of diverse people, citing its unique ability to capture experiences of oppression in an effort to pursue a social justice initiative (Choudhuri, 2005).

This shift seems especially relevant to the study of family difference within the context of transracial adoption. The current body of literature focused on families formed through transracial adoption has primarily addressed the impact of transracial adoption on the psychological outcome of adoptees as opposed to how complex dynamics of difference are addressed in these families. Baden and Wiley (2007) suggested that, although past research has focused on internal variables of adoptees (e.g., adjustment issues, depression, self-esteem) and
adoptees’ lifespan from birth to adolescence, future research should explore the experiences of adult adopted persons in the areas of identity development to uncover how adoption best serves these families across their lifetime. They further advocate for the use of qualitative research using adult adoptee participants to better understand how family difference influences transracial adoptees’ identity development and experiences with oppression and privilege (Baden & Wiley, 2007).

A glimpse into the narratives written by adults who were adopted transracially reveals the profound impact of difference illuminated through their own words, and provides evidence for the usefulness of a qualitative approach to unpack the meaning of difference in these families. For example, Dottie Enrico in her story *How I Learned I Wasn’t Caucasian* (1996) stated:

> As my brother and I stood alongside three or four neighborhood kids waiting to start our first day of kindergarten, a busload of older children passed…yelling, “Chinese cherries! Look at the Chinese cherries!” …I looked at the children around me. They were the same children I played hide and seek with…I didn’t see any Chinese people…I asked my playmates where the Chinese people were…“Dottie, they’re talking about us,” he [my brother] said. “We’re the Chinese people.” …We were not Chinese. We were Italians born in Korea, living in California…I came home and asked my mother, [who said]

> “Well, honey, you and your brother do sort of have an Asian look.”

Similarly, Rachel Noerdlinger, in her biographical essay *A Last Resort: The Identity My White Parents Couldn’t Give Me* (1996), reflected on the confusion she experienced as a Black woman being raised by White parents who avoided issues of race in their home:

> As I was growing up, my parents told me different things about my heritage—I was Ethiopian, Mexican, Black, White. But today, I say without hesitation that I am a 25-
year-old African American woman…But when I was a child, my life wasn’t “colorless.” It was White…By the time I was 20 I had moved more than 15 times…always to a town that was predominantly White. I became a chameleon…Countless classmates told me, “Rachel, you don’t act Black.” I am sick to think now I took it as a compliment…Sadly, as I began to identify more with African American culture, I was seen as rebellious back at home. My father, hurt, accused me of perpetuating racism, accentuating the great divide. (p. C3)

More recently, the first African American in New Mexico to be adopted by White parents wrote a memoir revealing his personal journey struggling with racial difference in his family. In his memoir *Black Baby White Hands* (2005), Jaiya John wrote:

> The growth of any positive identity in me was not inherently present just by being loved. I longed to be basted in affirmation. I needed my family to be the first and last bastion for my racial validation. I needed them to actively plant the seed in me that this racial part of my person was a good thing.

These authors, as well as others who have shared their personal stories, have shown that ways in which families formed through transracial adoption address racial difference is complex and often cannot be summarized in questionnaires of only a few items. Research conducted systematically through open-ended response formats may better capture and illustrate the real experiences of individuals in this type of family.

Future research is needed to better understand the mechanisms and characteristics that explain why and how some parents of transracially adoptive children become more racially aware than others. No research to date has investigated the reasons underlying changes in
parents’ recognition of racial difference in their families and how transracial adoptees participate in and are affected by challenges emerging from these changes.

**A Summary of the Void in the Current Literature**

Although federal laws have established a colorblind approach to adoption placements (i.e., prohibiting race from being a factor in adoption placement decisions), disagreement around what practices best meet the needs of adopted children still exists. Since the inception of transracial adoptive placements in the United States, families formed through transracial adoption have been scrutinized in society, many questioning the long-term effects inherent in placing of a child in a family of a different race. Despite the increase in the number of transracial adoptions during the last several decades, however, research on families formed through transracial adoption is predominantly conceptual in nature.

Empirical research examining transracially adoptive families is a fairly recent development in the field of psychology and sociology. The limited extant research on difference embedded in families formed through transracial adoption has focused mainly on various psychological outcomes of transracially adoptees. Much of the existing literature, however, reflects methodological problems such as small sample sizes, measures limited in scope and depth, and biased data sets that blur the accuracy of the results. For example, parent reports of youth behavior, as well as reports collected from young transracially adopted children, may not accurately reflect the experiences of transracially adopted individuals over time. Further, the findings to date have been inconsistent and have provided evidence to support both sides of the ongoing controversy (i.e., whether or not transracial adoption is harmful for children of color).

Although prior research has pointed to a connection between parents’ racial socialization behaviors and adoptees’ racial orientations and psychological adjustment, there remains a lack of
inquiry regarding transracial adoptees’ experiences of their parents’ racial socialization behaviors.
In other words, researchers have not sought to understand how transracial adoptees have interpreted efforts made by their parents to address racial differences in their family. Further, thus far researchers have defined racial socialization by inquiring about a limited set of behaviors. It is quite possible that transracially adopted youth understand racial socialization in ways researchers have yet to identify or examine. These unidentified interactions and relational patterns among transracially adopted individuals and their parents may account for some of the inconsistencies (e.g., regarding adoptee self-esteem) noted in research to date. For instance, parents who prepare Korean food and take trips to Korea with their Korean adopted children may invalidate their child’s race and culture in other ways, thereby contributing to their child’s lower self-esteem.

Further, whereas a substantial amount of research (e.g., Helms, 1990; Cross & Strauss, 1998; Hyers, 2001) has addressed racial identity development in people of color and White individuals of monoracial families, there is a distinct void in empirical literature pertaining to the racial identity attitudes (as defined by Cross, 1991; Helms, 1990) of parents and adoptees in transracially adoptive families and how transracially adopted individuals are affected by these attitudes. This topic warrants more extensive and in-depth research to provide a better understanding of the processes members of transracially adoptive families employ to understand their racial differences.

Beyond the common challenges that all families face as children develop, families formed through transracial adoption face challenges that also are influenced by their differences in biology and race. A review of the research conducted with families formed through transracial adoption indicates there is much we still do not know about how these families address issues of
difference, namely racial difference. Although most researchers recognize the multiple levels of
difference that exist in families formed through transracial adoption, little has been done to
understand how difference is perceived and dealt with in these families.

This investigation contributes to the literature by painting a clearer and more detailed
picture of the myriad ways in which families formed through transracial adoption address racial
difference by analyzing data collected from adult transracial adoptees in an open-ended format.
Given the lack of knowledge mental health practitioners assert regarding their work with families
formed through transracial adoption (e.g., Sass & Henderson, 2007), a clearer understanding of
the experiences of individuals who have been raised in this nontraditional family type is essential
so that counselors can more effectively meet the needs of their clients. Accordingly, the research
questions that guided this study were:

- How are racial differences addressed in families formed through transracial
  adoption?
- How are transracially adopted individuals (in childhood and adulthood)
  affected by ways in which their parents address or do not address issues of
  race with them?
- What do transracially adopted individuals think and feel about their own race
  and the race of their parents/other adoptive family members?

The time is ripe for collecting descriptive data directly from adult transracial adoptees in
order to better understand their experiences and to identify relevant variables embedded in these
experiences. Only through the identification of more relevant variables will future investigations
be able to examine elements of difference in families formed through transracial adoption in
more meaningful and accurate ways.
Chapter III

Method

Given this study’s aim to discover greater meaning and understanding of family difference directly from the perspective of individuals who face salient family differences in their growth and development, a qualitative approach designed to explore phenomena as they naturally occur, and to expose concepts and ideas about phenomena that have not been considered in prior research, seemed the most appropriate for collecting data. The meanings and themes derived from this approach can then be used to create more informed testable hypotheses suitable for examining the effects of difference in families.

Participants

Participants were recruited from various organizations that provide services to adoptive families. Those eligible for this study included people of color living in the United States, ages 25 to 55, who were adopted and raised in the United States by a White parent or parents. This age range was selected in order to include the cohort of adults who were adopted at the time when international adoptions grew in prevalence in the United States. Although international adoptions began following World War II, it was in the late 1950s that they escalated as a response to the many children orphaned throughout the Korean War (McGinnis, 2007). Further, although researchers typically use the age of 18 as the cut-off of adolescence and 19 as the start of early adulthood, 25 was chosen as the lower limit for this demographic group. Because this study examines how adult adoptees negotiate racial difference in their families, it was determined that eligible participants should have had the opportunity to search for their birth family. Although adoption law varies state to state, and only five states allow adopted persons access to their birth certificate through completion of an application, the age at which adoptees
can receive non-identifying or identifying information about their adoption ranges from 18 to 25 years of age.

As the purpose of this research was to initiate the exploration of the ways in which transracially adoptive families understand and address their racial difference, all transracial adoptees were considered eligible as long as they were a) adults of color who were b) adopted by White parents. In this way, the study was positioned to capture broad themes represented by the experiences of these adoptees, and the focus of the research could be on racial difference overall as opposed to the experiences specific to a particular racial group.

The type of adoption of participants in this study could be either domestic or international, but participants were limited to those whose adoption occurred during the adoptee’s infancy/toddlerhood (before their fifth birthday). Eligible participants had open (i.e., birth parents and adoptive parents have identifying information about each other), semi-open (i.e., birth parents and adoptive parents communicate through a mediator such as an adoption agency), or closed adoptions (i.e., birth parents and adoptive parents do not have access to identifying information about each other)—the level of openness of the adoption was not a factor for exclusion in this study.

The sample consisted of 13 adopted adults born in various countries, including the United States (n=5), Colombia (n=4), Korea (n=3), and Mexico (n=1). This number falls within the guidelines of eight to 15 participants specified for Consensual Qualitative Research analyses (CQR; Hill et al., 1997; Hill et al., 2005), as will be described later. The adults of color who participated also ranged in terms of their racial self-designations; five identified as Hispanic, three identified as Asian, and the remaining five identified as biracial. Among those who are biracial, three had one Black and one White birthparent, one had one Black and one Asian
birthparent, and one had one Asian and one Hispanic birthparent. Ethnically, participants identified as Colombian (n=4), Korean (n=2), Filipino (n=1), Mexican (n=1), Japanese/Cuban (n=1), African American/Korean (n=1), and African American/Irish (n =1). Two of the biracial participants who participated did not have information about the ethnicity of their birthparent of color. One of these participants identified with the ethnicity of her birthmother (Irish), while the other identified ethnically according to her adoptive parents’ background (Jewish). Four participants were male and the remaining nine were female. Participants ranged in age from 27 to 53 (M=36.92, SD=6.33). The age at which participants were adopted ranged from being adopted at birth to being adopted at the age of three. Twelve of the 13 participants were adopted before their first birthday. Two of the 13 participants were raised with a birth sibling, who also was adopted by their parents. Nine participants were raised with a sibling who also was adopted (but who was not a birth sibling) and four were raised with siblings who were born to their adoptive parents. Each participant reported that their adoption was closed and 10 were in placements prior to their adoption, including foster care and orphanages.

Procedures

Recruitment began through contacting organizations involved in advocacy, support, and mental health services for individuals who have been adopted. The primary researcher contacted several organizations and provided directors and staff members of these organizations with a description of the study and request for participants. This request was posted on websites and emailed to listservs for transracially adopted persons. Several individuals contacted the primary researcher via email upon reading a description of the research project. The primary researcher answered questions potential interviewees posed, enabling interested parties to determine if they wanted to participate. News of the project circulated widely and, thus, many interested
individuals lived out of state. As a result, phone interviews were presented as an option for participants so that their stories could be included within the data. Every effort was made to conduct interviews in person when possible. Ultimately, seven interviews took place over the phone and six took place in person (locations included libraries and private office spaces). Those interviews that were conducted over the phone were recorded using an online technology provided by cogi.com. Participants were informed of the online recording technology and their interviews were stored in a confidential, password-protected online file. Data collected from participants in person was stored in a locked file cabinet.

The interviews were conducted between Fall 2009 and Fall 2010. The 13 participants in this study received consent forms informing them of the nature of the research, as well as stating that their participation was completely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. After signing the consent form, each participant participated in a semi-structured interview conducted by the primary researcher. Interviews ranged in length from 38 minutes to an hour and 35 minutes. At the end of each interview, participants completed a demographic questionnaire. Participants who were interviewed over the phone emailed or faxed their consent and demographic forms to the primary researcher. Interviews were audio-taped and then transcribed for data analysis. If requested, participants will be emailed a summary of results at the conclusion of the research study.

**Instruments**

**Demographic Form**

A demographic questionnaire (see Appendix A) was used to collect information about each participant including age, gender, race self-identification, highest educational degree attained, type of community in childhood and adulthood, race of birth parents, ethnicity of birth
parents, ethnic self-identification, number of siblings, adoption-status of siblings, race of siblings, birth country, type of adoption (e.g., open, semi-open, closed), age at adoption, placements prior to adoption (if any), and age of adoptive parents at adoption.

**Interview Protocol**

A semi-structured interview questionnaire was derived from the study’s research questions (see Appendix B). The interview protocol was designed to maximize the participant’s ability to share his/her personal story regarding the topic of this research. Questions were directed primarily toward participants’ experiences and less toward an analysis of their actions and behaviors (Hill et al., 1997). Prior to data collection, the interview protocol was piloted on two individuals meeting many of the eligibility characteristics of participants. These individuals provided feedback to the primary investigator regarding their experience of the protocol, and the protocol was retained and implemented as originally written.

**Data Analysis**

Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR; Hill et al., 1997; Hill et al., 2005) was used to analyze the interview narratives in this study. CQR is an approach that incorporates both qualitative and quantitative components. Incorporating aspects from grounded theory, phenomenological, and comprehensive process analysis approaches, CQR allows for an in-depth examination of individuals’ experiences. With regard to its philosophical underpinnings, Hill and her colleagues (2005) identified CQR as having both constructivist and postpositivist elements. CQR is particularly useful as a research methodology for topics that have not yet been explored in great depth. The CQR process features the incorporation of multiple researchers to foster various perspectives through the reaching of consensus, and the use of auditors to minimize effects of groupthink (Hill et al., 2005). CQR is a well-established methodology that
has appeared in many of the leading academic journals across fields of psychology.

Furthermore, CQR has been used in the exploration of numerous topics within psychological research. For example, CQR has been used in studies investigating career development (Blustein, Kenna, Murphy, DeVoy, & DeWine, 2005), family support among same-sex couples (Rstosky et al., 2004), self-disclosure in counseling and supervisory relationships (e.g., Burkard et al., 2006; Knox et al., 2008), the experience of second-generation Americans (Park-Taylor et al., 2008) and their parents (Inman, Howard, Beaumont, & Walker, 2007), the impact of childhood leukemia (Brown et al., 2008), and the role of feminism and religion in women’s lives (Ali et al., 2008).

As opposed to other research methodologies that utilize multiple data sources (e.g., documents, questionnaires) in addition to interview transcripts, CQR generally relies solely on interview data. Further, throughout analysis, CQR emphasizes the importance of staying as close as possible to the meaning conveyed explicitly by the participants. Researchers work collaboratively in an inductive process, drawing conclusions from the data rather than imposing theory or pre-conceived structure on it. This inductive and constructivist approach from which CQR was developed necessitates the acknowledgement and discussion of researchers’ biases and assumptions throughout data analysis.

**Development of Domains**

Before data analysis began, two of the transcribed interviews were set aside for later analysis (i.e., the stability check). To begin the development of domains, each researcher created a “start list” of topic areas from a review of the literature, the interview protocol, and three transcribed interviews. Researchers shared their start list with each other and argued them to consensus, thereby arriving at one common list of domains that best represented the narratives.
An auditor, after reviewing the same data materials, reviewed the proposed start list of domains and provided feedback to the research team at which point researchers made changes to the list as necessary.

Next, researchers independently divided interview data into the domains and then came together to reach consensus on which portions of each narrative fit within each specific domain. During this step, all data was maintained exactly as it was collected from the participant (i.e., segmented sections under each domain were in the participant’s exact words). The start list and the first three domainized transcriptions were submitted to the auditor for her review. She provided feedback regarding the fit of the domains to the interview data. The research team then argued her feedback to consensus, revising the initial start list of domains and re-sectioning the data from the first three domains according to the new domain list. Team members then proceeded to segment each of the transcribed interviews according to the domains, arguing their choices to consensus consistently throughout the process. At this point, the data was submitted to the auditor for a second review. Feedback from the auditor was reviewed and necessary changes to the manner in which narratives were divided into domains were made (e.g., brief revisions to the domain list were made at this time as well).

**Development of Core Ideas**

Core ideas are developed in order to summarize the content listed under each domain for each case (i.e., each participant interview). The purpose of this step is to edit the participant’s words into a clear and concise statement of meaning that stays as close to the participant’s own words as possible. Hill et al. (2005) asserted that core ideas should reduce repetition and not be influenced by assumptions and biases. Team members first abstracted core ideas for each case (i.e., each piece of segmented material under each domain was summarized). Once each member
came up with core ideas for each case, they argued the ideas to consensus to arrive at the most representative summary statements under each domain, for each interview. The materials were then again submitted to the auditor who reviewed the core ideas and provided feedback to the research team.

**Cross-Analyses**

In order to identify shared experiences across participants, the researchers then analyzed the data across cases. Team members examined each of the core ideas within a particular domain to determine how the core ideas clustered into categories. Categories must come from the data and not from theories or ideas imposed on the data by the research team. As categories were created, researchers consulted with the original narratives to ensure that the integrity of each participant’s experience was maintained. Once core ideas across the cases were organized into categories, the auditor reviewed the categories and provided more feedback to the research team.

**Stability Check**

The two cases that were set aside prior to data analysis were analyzed in the same manner that each of the other cases was examined (i.e., identification of domains, core ideas, etc.). This step provided a type of reliability check of the data to establish whether the findings were stable. Stable findings are evidenced when core ideas emerging from the new cases fit within the categories previously determined (without the need for many additional categories) and do not significantly alter the frequency labels assigned to each category. If the stability check revealed that the categories derived from the cases analyzed first were not generalizable to new cases, more data would have had to be collected (i.e., from additional participants) until the stability check revealed consistency within categories and frequency labels (Hill et al., 1997). Because
the core ideas abstracted from the two set-aside interviews fit within the existing categories with little adjustment required, the analysis was deemed stable and no further interview data was collected.

**Frequency Labels**

Although CQR up until this point is qualitative in nature, there is a quantitative step in the data analysis that involves the counting of cases represented within each category. Categories that are derived from each participant, or all but one participant, in the sample are labeled *general*. Those that represent at least half of the cases in the sample are labeled *typical*. *Variant* categories are those that apply to less than half but more than one of the cases, and categories representing only one case are labeled *rare*. Rare categories are not considered representative of the sample and, therefore, are not included in the final results (see Table 1). This quantitative component of the analysis allows researchers to determine which of the participants’ experiences are the most shared among the sample and, thus, likely best represent the population.

**Research Team**

The primary researcher was a White non-adopted female doctoral student who has had experience conducting research with the proposed methodology. She oversaw and led all procedures of the study, including the recruitment of participants, data collection, and data analysis. The research supervisor for this project was a White non-adopted faculty member at a large university in Northeastern United States with experience and expertise in the method proposed for this study. The primary researcher recruited two research assistants to complete the CQR team. One research assistant was a Black non-adopted female Master’s student in counseling psychology and the other was a White non-adopted female who recently graduated
from a Master’s program in counseling psychology. The assistants received training in the methodology before embarking on data analysis.

**Expectations and Biases**

Prior to the start of data analysis, research team members met to discuss their expectations of results and individual biases regarding the research sample. Hill and her colleagues (1997) suggested that an open and honest consideration and discussion of biases and expectations would minimize the impact of each member’s perceptions and subjectivities on their assessment and interpretation of the raw interview data. Each team member shared that she approached the study with the belief that transracially adoptive parents should address issues of race with their child and embrace their child’s culture as a part of their family identity. One team member expected that participants would discuss a pivotal moment in their lives, a time when they were confronted with their racial difference and challenged and pained by it. Another member anticipated that participants would identify either as White or a person of color, and that there would be no fluidity in racial identity expressed by the interviewees. All of the team members anticipated that participants would describe ways in which their adoptive parents struggled to address race with them. The research assistant of color shared that she anticipated different responses and experiences among participants based on their racial background; namely, that Black transracial adoptees would be more challenged by their racial difference because they would be less accepted by society. Another member concurred, suggesting that Asian adoptees would be perceived by the community as less different from their White families and, thus, be more accepted. She added that the negotiation of racial difference would likely be just as complex and demanding for Asian adoptees, but possibly in different ways than for Black transracial adopted persons.
Skin tone was another issue raised in the discussion of expectations and biases. One research assistant expected skin tone to be a salient point of discussion to emerge in the interview data. Another team member wondered if participants would struggle to tease apart the impact of adoption in general, difference in biology, from the transracial component of their adoption, difference in race. Further, given the exposure of transracial adoption in the media and in popular culture with celebrity adoptions, research team members wondered if participants would address the impact of the media on the state of transracial adoption and the public’s perception of transracial adoption at the current time. Two of the research assistants anticipated experiencing feelings of discomfort and frustration towards participants who deny their racial identity as a person of color and present, instead, a colorblind perspective. Lastly, another research assistant acknowledged that, because of her desire to adopt in the future, she may become defensive at points when participants negatively judge their adoptive parents.

Social Location of Researcher: Insider/Outsider Considerations

The race of the primary researcher differed from the races of each participant in the project, the primary researcher being White and the participants being people of color. According to research examining reference group differences between researchers and participants (e.g., Beoku-Betts, 1994; Collins, 1986; Riessman, 1987; & De Andrade, 2000), often referred to as insider/outside issues, the impact of this difference in qualitative studies is not clear-cut. In recent decades, theorists and researchers have called attention to an in-between that exists, and that may be lost, amidst a forced identification of researcher as either insider or outsider. As Lelia Lomba de Andrade (2000) noted, regarding her experience with fieldwork:

Participants are not simply sharing their perspectives of race and ethnicity, they are crafting interpretations in reaction to and through interaction with researchers. That is,
race and ethnicity are simultaneously the subject and the product of field research. This perspective also helps blur the line between insider and outsider research. (p. 286-287)

De Andrade cautioned researchers not to perceive cultural identities in static and one-dimensional ways, but to acknowledge the complex and layered meanings that racial designations such as Black, White, Latino/a, or Asian can take on. She urged researchers to be sensitive to the subtleties that emerge in research involving racial and ethnic identities, as these identities must be negotiated between researchers and participants in ways that are more complex than a simple assignment of same or different. Collins (1986) described the outsider-within standpoint of researcher, where individuals’ multiple identities are recognized—both those that allow a researcher the vantage point of an insider looking out and those that provide the vantage point of an outsider looking in. For example, Beoku-Betts (1994) found that as a Black woman conducting fieldwork amidst Black communities, she was neither completely the same nor completely different from her participants. Rather, there were identities she shared with them (being Black and female) while there were others that she did not (e.g., marital status, professional affiliation). Further, just as differences in social locations between researcher and participant can influence research, so too can similarities. Riessman (1987) suggested that a perfect match between researcher and participant is rarely possible, and not always desirable. She posited that in order to truly listen to our participants, we must attend to and take cues from our participants and “mute the voice of science,” a voice rooted in dominant social groups (p. 191). Despite our best efforts, however, it must be acknowledged that interviews taking place across social divides (e.g., racial, ethnic, and adoption-status divides), can be affected by the differences and similarities between researcher and participant, and are not free from subjectivities associated with each person’s social context.
Participants in this study, who were people of color raised in White families, evoke the complexities inherent in racial and ethnic identities. It cannot be assumed that participants identified with and only with their racial group, and therefore, their perceptions of difference with regard to the researcher also cannot be assumed. Because of the fluidity intrinsic in reference group differences between researcher and participant, the primary researcher of this study engaged each participant in a conversation about these group identities following the interview. The primary researcher also answered questions posed to her by participants concerning her race and adoptive status.
Chapter IV

Results

In this chapter, the results of the qualitative analysis will be presented according to the 10 domains that emerged from the data, as well as the categories represented within each domain. The frequency labels applied to each category will be reported, according to the specifications outlined by Hill and her colleagues (2005). Categories applying to 12 or 13 cases were labeled *general*, those applying to seven to 11 cases were labeled *typical*, and those applying to two to six cases were labeled *variant*. Consistent with recommendations provided by Hill and her colleagues (2005), categories represented by only one case were labeled *rare* and, thus, will not be included in this chapter, as they are deemed uncharacteristic of the study’s sample.

Prior to detailing each of the domains and categories that arose out of the interview data, a narrative illustrating the typical participant’s experience as a person of color raised by White adoptive parents will be presented. Hill, Thompson, and Williams (1997) suggested that researchers construct such a narrative based on the categories of general and typical frequencies. According to the interview data collected in this study, the following narrative conveys the typical experience of an adopted person of color who was raised by White parents.

Within this analysis, the typical adult of color who was transracially adopted by White parents feels close to her family yet remembers a great deal of family discord in her developmental years. She recalls attending primarily White schools and living in predominantly White communities. Her adoptive family did not address race with her, conveying the message that her difference was not seen and that she should not associate herself with her birth culture. Outside her adoptive family, however, she was made to feel different and inferior. She recalls being excluded from certain groups of people as a result of being perceived as either too White
or too non-White. She feels that her racial and ethnic identity is constantly questioned, assumed, and/or misunderstood. A person of color in a White family, she believes that she does not entirely fit in anywhere. She can recall times during which she noticed her racial difference with little to no discomfort. Yet, she also recalls times when awareness of the racial difference in her family made her moderately to severely uncomfortable. As an adult, she currently identifies with her birth culture but finds her adult social circles consist primarily of White adults. She has no desire to search for or connect with her birth family but hopes to learn more about other cultures and grow closer to her birth culture in the coming years. She asserts that any White parents considering transracial adoption should increase their own, and their family’s, awareness of their child’s birth culture. They also should make sure to incorporate people of their child’s birth culture in their family life.

**Domains and Categories**

A thorough and systematic analysis of the 13 semi-structured interviews conducted in this study yielded 10 overall themes to describe the participants’ experiences. Each of these themes, identified as domains in CQR analysis, will be described, as well as the categories that emerged from a cross-analysis of the interview narratives. The categories materialize from a higher level of abstraction and discovery within the analysis process and, thus, provide greater meaning to the content of each domain. A list of the domains and their respective categories can be found in Table 1, and categories will be italicized in the text below.

**Relationship with/Knowledge of Birth Family**

This first domain describes participants’ experiences and feelings regarding their contact or lack of contact with birth family members. There was only one typical category to emerge within this domain: *I have no desire to search for/connect with my birth family*. The remaining
six categories in this domain were variant, two of which highlight possible reasons for choosing not to search for one’s birth family. A variant number of participants reported that they imagined connection to my birth family is/would be painful and, thus, a search requires emotional maturity. One participant illustrated how anticipated pain and challenges associated with knowing one’s birth family serves to keep her from searching:

I think it’s also been within the last five years that I’ve wanted to go out and search for this medical history. Um, I kind of have a start but I also don’t want to see my birthmother… I want her to know that I’m okay and that she did a good thing, she did the right thing. But I don’t want to get sucked into—once again it’s the guilt—of having to send money and provide and whatnot because I’m the one she sent away and is in the U.S.

Another participant, who also acknowledged the pain associated with searching for his birth family, attributed his success with the timing of the search itself:

I was forty-eight years old. My kids were old enough. You know, my kids were more or less out of the house I think… And it was like, you know, I had been [in my profession] for long enough that I felt like I could, I had the energy to [do it]. I didn’t have to focus on what I was doing immediately. You know, I felt like I had a little emotional space. I had some reserves.

A variant number of participants had an interest in searching for their birth families and proceeded with a search and found birth family members. Some members of this variant group reported being rejected by my birth family. Another variant number of participants shared that they grew up with inaccurate information or secrecy regarding birth family. One participant
even cited her race as part of her birth story that was kept from her family during the adoption process:

My birth certificate, like, I mean, everything went through as Caucasian. And it really wasn’t until I got, like, a little older where my parents kinda scratched their heads, kinda thinking like, wait a minute, you know, she’s really not that White. Like, her features aren’t that White; but all they have to go on is what the adoption agency told them, that my birth mother is White.

A variant number of interviewees reported having received information about my birth family, and another variant number spoke of having an interest in searching for or having found birth family. One participant indicated the personal and individualized aspects of deciding whether or not to search, distinguishing herself from her twin sister:

Well, I decided to search when I was about 18 or so after we left my adopted family’s, my dad’s home, and started college, and it became a really important thing for me. And not so much for my twin sister, but for me.

**Childhood Experiences with Adoptive Family**

This domain includes categories regarding the quality of relationships participants shared with their adoptive family members during their development, as well as characteristics of the communities in which they grew up. Four typical categories and nine variant categories emerged within this domain. A typical number of participants shared that their *family was close*; a typical number also noted *family discord* in their experiences as youths. One participant described the following dynamic with her parents:

I started drinking also, when I was like 15. And I used to get in fights with my mom a lot. And I used to scream like “oh, you’re not my real parents.” You know, stuff like
that. So that’s, and again, that’s why, you know, I’m pretty sure that it, you know, I know that it was like related to me being adopted. And not really knowing where I fit in. You know, in the family or in the world…I tested them. I, who knows, I might have been testing them to see if they would just put me out.

Participants also noted that they grew up in White schools and communities and that their adoptive family did not address race, both typical categories. One participant referred to the lack of acknowledgment about his race as “a gaping hole.” He continued:

I think there’s nothing that they could have said that would’ve made me feel okay or 100% better, but it would’ve been nice to get a little empathy or a little, maybe not empathy, they couldn’t offer empathy, but a little understanding, a little “it must be tough.”

While several participants echoed these sentiments, others shared ways in which their adoptive family did address race and noted that they grew up in diverse schools and communities. One adoptee shared her gratitude for her adoptive family, another variant category:

I mean, I have a great family. I wouldn’t trade them for the world. They would do anything for me. I mean, my parents are the most wonderful people I could ever ask for. And I know they would do anything for me and I’m so grateful for that.

Others shared feeling special and described how their parental relationships improved over time. A variant number of participants shared pain associated with being left out of childhood peer groups, a pain that was in some cases buffered by having an adopted sibling, another variant category. As this participant shares, however, siblings of transracial adoption can be very different:
Yeah, she’d say she’s White. The only thing, obviously her looks but, her philosophies, just her perspective, is definitely that of a Caucasian professional person. She doesn’t eat Korean food. She dates White people. All her friends are White. So I don’t think she acknowledges it as much as maybe I do.

Some participants noted that their *adoptive parents were unable to have the children they wanted* and that their *adoptive family changed their name*, the remaining two variant categories.

**Race/Racial Messages Received from Adoptive Family**

A typical number of participants summarized messages from family as “you aren’t different; I don’t see your difference.” For some participants, this message translated into a denial of racism: “I didn’t get anything about race,” noted one participant while recalling messages from his parents, “and there is no such thing about racism. The racism is in your mind. I remember them telling me that as a kid.” In addition to a lack of acknowledgment about racial difference, other participants shared how the significance of racial and ethnic differences was *minimized*, a variant category. Other variant groups of participants spoke of receiving messages from family members such as “you shouldn’t associate with your birth culture” or “acknowledge your birth race/culture selectively.” With regard to the latter, one participant relayed the message that her difference in race was not acknowledged unless identifying as a woman of color would permit her to receive external gains:

The one thing we do remember, though, is when we had to fill out any type of paperwork, like for school or government or whatever and they would always ask “race,” my dad would always make us put down White, and I think eventually we questioned that and were like, “but we’re not,” and that’s what my dad wanted us to put down. Ironically enough, up until the time we were applying for colleges and then all of a sudden when we
needed money for college, we were supposed to put down Hispanic. So that was a very clear message about, you know, Hispanics need more money, or have less money or, you know, you’ll get more things if you put that down but if you…but then there were advantages to putting down White because my dad would say, “you are in our family which is White and you are”…uh, basically being White was synonymous, at least when we were growing up, with being American. I mean I think we thought it was one and the same. And it wasn’t until we left our nuclear family, which is when we were 18 and went to college, that I was recruited specifically as a Hispanic student going to visit my school of choice.

Another variant number of participants shared that “racists jokes and comments were made in my adoptive family.” One noted “every once in a while he [my dad] would joke and he’d say nigger and stuff like that, which appalled me all the time.” Another shared that her parents directed racist sentiments toward her significant other when she introduced him to them:

Well, they first wanted to know his legal status ‘cause in the area we live in there are a lot of illegal Spanish people so they wanted to make sure that, you know, first of all, does this guy have a job, is he legitimate, does he have the right to be here and to have a job, to work and study?

Conversely, other variant groups of participants spoke about ways in which their adoptive family supported the acknowledgment of my race/culture or ways in which their birth race/culture was incorporated within family life.

I think my dad didn’t really focus on race a whole lot other than through, kind of books and literature he would give me—books about Black history and things like that and so…I remember trying to do homework with them and saying, I think it was algebra and
I said “I can’t do this,” and I had internalized some of the messages about how you’re supposed to be dumb, from the dominant culture, and he got really upset. He said, “oh, no, you are smart.” And maybe it wasn’t directly about race but I think in ways that it was indirectly about, “no, you are just as capable as, you know, your White counterparts.”

**Race/Racial Messages Received from Others**

Participants shared many messages they received from people (outside of their families) as a result of their transracial adoptee status. “*You are different and inferior*” was a message received by a typical number of participants who spoke about experiences of racial discrimination. One Latina adoptee shared:

So when India came up, my teacher insisted that I dress up as the Indian kid and put a red dot on my head. And I remember being devastated, and still feeling very angry and being like “but I’m not Indian, like, I don’t care if I’m dark. I’m Spanish and I’m from Colombia.” But we weren’t going to study Colombia, God forbid.

Other typical groups of participants shared feeling ostracized by messages such as “*You don’t belong here*” or “*What are you*?” A biracial female adoptee captured the complexity of the “What are you?” messages:

Sephardic Jewish people look at me and say, “you could be Sephardic.” Ethiopian people say, “you know what, you’re kind of Ethiopian.” People say, “you know what, you’re probably…” Um, so there’s this whole thing of [being] everybody but nobody.

Similarly, participants repeatedly confronted public disbelief that they belonged with their parents and/or siblings, as conveyed by the variant category, “*They can’t be your family*.”
When I was much younger, I guess I didn’t realize that people would view us as, um, sort of different and unusual, but once I got, I guess, to being a teenager I suppose I started realizing—oh, when people see us they don’t automatically think of us as a family.

A variant number of participants reflected on assumptions made by others based on racial stereotypes. A Black adoptee shared: “I wasn’t even driving and I was racially profiled. I mean, and it’s just, again, that overall message—you’re violent. Um, you’re doing something wrong. There’s something bad about you. You’re not smart. I mean, those are very common messages.” A biracial Asian/Black adopted person added, “people in school would try to cheat off me because they thought I was, you know, smart” while a Colombian adoptee recalls receiving the message, “oh no, well your people aren’t good at math.” Finally, a variant group of participants felt that others didn’t see their difference as a big deal, while another variant group received the message that they are lucky and should be grateful:

Then there’s the not so nice side of the adoption. You know, the side of this is that you have this whole vortex that you are in which you usually can’t vocalize or tap into emotionally. Because everybody is so positive about, “oh, well you have a family now,” and so there’s this dark side…it’s difficult because we don’t necessarily talk about it…and if you do, you’re seen as ungrateful.

Personal Meanings and Feelings Associated with Transracial Adoption

In a domain that comprised participants’ affective and cognitive reflections upon the broad experience of being adopted transracially, participants shared the rewards and challenges that they feel are hallmarks of the unique types of difference embodied by their families. The one feeling reported by a typical number of participants, and thus the most commonly reported
experience, was that of *not fitting in anywhere*. As one participant put it “everyone and no one embraces you at the same time.” Another participant shared:

[It’s like] living in two different worlds. There’s the dominant culture world. Uh, the dominant culture, which is primary, which is obviously White. And then to kind of, having to cross over back and forth between the dominant culture, in this country, and then my ethnic culture, kind of more African American culture. And trying to go back and forth between those two worlds or, uh, between those two cultures I should say…There are some people that are accepting in both cultures and both worlds, so to speak, but there’s always folks who are not accepting and, you know, I get communications such as, you don’t, you know, you’re not White enough, you’re not Black enough.

A variant number of participants spoke about the challenge of experiencing *uncertainty associated with an absence of biological information/connection*. One participant described the uncertainty as follows:

Maybe, even if your mother is like a prostitute and your father is a murderer, you still see the flesh and bone. You still know who it is. You still have a character to compare yourself to. You still have a personality to compare yourself to. You still have likes and dislikes to compare yourself to. You still have an ethnicity or a racial background or a religious background that you can, at least in some way, maybe compare yourself to. When you are adopted, you have nothing. Nothing at all, and you’re just walking around like the freakin’ riddler with a question mark on there, and no one can answer the riddle.

Other variant groups of participants spoke about *learning about racism from personal experience*, or reflected on *the importance of physical appearance* as a transracial adopted
person. Developing a greater perspective and broader understanding of people and cultures was another variant category within this domain.

I’m extremely aware. I’m aware that I don’t know what people’s struggles are because you can’t see what they are. So like, as people look at me they don’t know what I’ve dealt with, and I don’t know what other people have dealt with. Therefore, you know, you try to treat everyone the way that you want to be treated and I think I really really try to, you know, just treat people with warmth and all that and I think that has been a gift that was given because of the struggles that I’ve been through.

Being grateful was a sentiment expressed by a variant number of participants, as was separation anxiety and fear of rejection. Reflecting on her gratitude, one adoptee said:

I mean, it was really great because I guess I always knew, like, you know, that Colombia’s not really a great place. It’s dangerous so I always felt privileged and very lucky, I guess. You know, as opposed to someone who was just born into a family like that.

Another spoke about fears of abandonment:

I would never believe that my mom was gonna be home when I got home, like I would be like, “ah, she’s not gonna be home” or “where is she?” like I have these visions of her just disappearing off the face of the earth.

A last variant group of participants pointed out that the rewards and challenges of being transracially adopted are not static but that the meaning has evolved over time.

I’ve become more aware of [the impact] more recently in my late 20s…[more now than] I was probably ever in my life before. I mean, it’s, I guess just reflecting back on, you know, this is how I react to certain things in my life…this is how I dealt with certain
things in my life…um, and just some of the choices that I’ve made in my life…all I feel
have to do with the circumstances of how I grew up and the family that I grew up in.
And that directly relates to me being adopted, and kind of not knowing where I came
from.

Adaptations and Reactions Resulting from Race-Related Experiences

Participants described many ways of reacting and responding to the messages that they
received about racial difference from people in their lives. Categories within this domain
describe the negative and positive ways that participants coped with and reacted to encounters in
which they were specifically confronted by others with regard to race. Each of the categories
within this domain was endorsed by variant numbers of participants. Participants used
substances, were angry, felt hurt and anxious, or got therapy. They also spoke about ways in
which they isolated themselves from others, another variant category:

I was looking for some words that would help me and nobody seemed to be able to
speak to me. And I just, that feeling of isolation just never dissipated except at moments.
I mean, there were obviously, there were relenting moments and gifted times but, by and
large, that was my major recollection. I didn’t even go to the graduation. Yes, actually, I
did go to the graduation. I went to the graduation and watched everybody who
graduated…I didn’t walk or anything. It was awful, okay, just put it that way. It was
really awful…How could I be aware when everybody who was charged with the
responsibility for raising me was either convinced or taught [me] that those things don’t
matter…I was at sea. No wonder I was at sea.

While a group of participants dealt with negative race-related experiences by avoiding
people of their birth culture, others chose to confront people about racial/cultural issues. One
adopted person said, “So I focus, like I said, on the next generation. And who can get it, and is willing to listen, and have a conversation and debate. And have a thought or an opinion on it.” Some participants shared that race-related experiences caused them to *become aware of their lack of knowledge about their birth culture* and, as a result, they *became proactive in learning about their birth culture*. In response to his parents’ lack of acknowledgement of racial difference, one transracial adoptee said, “so they pushed me, ah, they pushed me into the researching and becoming the other, for real, instead of just saying I was born there.” Acknowledgement and lack of acknowledgment of racial difference caused some participants to *experience confusion*:

> Some of the things these other cultures would say did describe some of my extended family so that just confused me because here’s some of the members of my extended family fitting into cultural stereotypes and you expect more from your family, you expect them to rise above that and be better than that but, when they’re the embodiment of a White cultural stereotype, that’s hard to take.

Another variant group of participants shared how race-related encounters spurred them to work to *increase their self-esteem*, while others reported *learning to conform to social expectations* in order to adapt to race-related experiences. A Colombian adoptee shared:

> I don’t know if it’s the way I carry myself, or the way I speak or whatnot, but no one ever guesses Hispanic the first time out. So I kind of use that to my advantage occasionally…Many times I just let people think, I’m like, yeah sure, cause if that’s what you think then maybe that, you know, is better in your head so we’ll go with that.
Finally, some participants’ responses with regard to race-related events was to report that such encounters had not been frequent or significant for them, resulting in the variant category race hasn’t been a significant issue.

Suggestions for White Transracial Adoptive Parents

Two typical and six variant categories emerged from this domain. The suggestions that were endorsed by the most participants included: increase your own and your family’s awareness of your child’s birth culture and incorporate people of your child’s birth culture within family life. Participants shared that prospective transracial adoptive parents should “have books with people that look like their child in their home” and “let them speak the language because if they don’t then they’re really lost.” They advocated for parents to “be uncomfortable and connect with folks that are, who take them outside of their comfort zone and their privilege” and to “move to a more diverse community [so your child can feel] normal and accepted.” A variant group of participants emphasized, though, that while it’s important to embrace the child’s culture, don’t force it.

While some participants highlighted the importance of preparing children for the challenges they will face, others stressed being prepared for the challenges they, as White transracial adoptive parents, will face. One participant urged:

I’d think very carefully if that’s kind of what you want to get yourself into…Do you want to constantly be asked questions of how you adopted your child?...I mean, because there are going to be people who look and there are people who give you that nasty look, “how dare you adopt outside your race.” And it’s going to be from both sides.
Similarly, a variant number of participants advised prospective transracial adoptive parents to *know their reasons for adopting transracially*. As one participant put it, parents need to ask themselves:

> Why as a White couple, why do we want to adopt a non-White child? Like, why do we really want to do this? And, is it because, as we are, you know, as we have this…not to be rude about it but like, this White sense of entitlement, like is it because you need to help the world? Are you doing it that way? Or like, why? Why are you doing it? And then, like, be honest with it. Because it’s a life. And you are raising this life. And, do you like…are you doing it out of pity? Because I think that’s pathetic. Or are you doing it really out of love? Are you doing it because you really want to have this beautiful child in your family?

*Being open to dialogue and questions* and *recognizing that race matters* are the remaining two categories (both variant) in this domain. One participant reminded prospective parents that the conversations should be age-appropriate and introduce aspects of subtle racism when it’s developmentally appropriate:

> I think having age-appropriate conversations. And as the child gets older, especially as they get school-aged, and then middle school and high school, is that preparing them for the kind of more subtle comments. You know, “you’re so articulate.” For Asian Americans, it’s the idea of the perpetual foreigner.

Another adoptee shared her strong feelings that parents recognize that race matters and behave accordingly:

> So I would just say…not being afraid to, to talk about race, and this business of race doesn’t matter, or color doesn’t matter, it’s just BS. And any parent who says that,
whether they’re in a home study, or are about to adopt a kid, or a social worker or an agency thinks that’s the right answer for them to give in order for that to happen, is sorely mistaken. Because it does. And you will be ill-equipped when it does matter.

Experience of Own Racial Identity

In a domain that comprised individuals’ exploration of their individual racial-ethnic development, participants discussed the varying degrees to which their birth and adoptive races/cultures have been salient during their lives and/or are incorporated into their current sense of racial identity. Four typical categories emerged from this category. Interestingly, a typical number of participants shared that there were times when they noticed their racial difference with little to no discomfort but another typical number shared that there were times when they noticed racial difference with moderate to severe discomfort. The level of discomfort associated with racial difference was perhaps impacted by participants’ level of awareness of racial difference at different times in their lives. As one participant reflected: “I think I had, I had exposure to a lot of different cultures and I kind of, in my mind, you know, I fit into all the cultures and it’s, I don’t know, I never really…it just all worked.” Another participant illustrated an opposing experience, one filled with great discomfort:

There were things about it that were really difficult in terms of accepting a body. This whole body seemed strange…It’s not a face that I see anywhere. And I felt, maybe, I felt bad. I felt bad. I didn’t like my face. And I didn’t know what to do about it. Yet then you also don’t know what to say about it…I didn’t understand what it meant to be Japanese and Cuban, cause it made a difference in terms of who I could go out with. You know, who would talk to me…I didn’t know that…and, you know, it just gets clearer to me all the time that how I meet people isn’t how I was raised. I was raised in a White
family and felt White. And um, that’s not necessarily how I will be greeted. And I had ample indications all along, that was the case. But it was, in terms of internalizing it and owning it, it took me at least forty-five years.

Typical numbers of participants shared that they currently identify with their birth culture/race and that they hope to learn about other cultures and grow closer to their birth culture. One Korean adoptee spoke about becoming more interested in her birth culture once she visited her birth country (Korea) and had the opportunity to live there. Another participant adopted from Korea shared the same interest in her birth culture, but still felt held back by a fear of not being accepted:

He [my dad] got me a passport and was like, “okay, we are going to go to Korea” and I was like, “I don’t want to go.” And I backed out of the trip…And I have such a desire to connect with [the culture but] I’m so terrified that I won’t, like, be accepted.

Variant numbers of participants currently identify themselves with their adoptive culture/race and spoke about ways in which they have rejected aspects of their birth culture, such as refusing offers to travel to their birth country or resisting books about or foods from their birth culture. Other participants stated that they identified racially as White or that they don’t hold a specific racial identity (both variant categories). One adopted woman shared the following regarding her lack of racial identity:

Well, I’m still not too comfortable with it. Again, even now, like with my own kids, most of their friends, then again most of my community where I live now is mostly White. It’s like 90% White and, um, so that’s who they hang out with. So I really, honestly, I don’t address it. I just go about my business and just play a different card
when it comes to relating to other adults in the community...special needs. I’ve got an autistic son.

Other participants who shared *feelings of uncertainty about their racial/cultural identities tried to please others and fit in.*

I would always try to put on a happy face. I know I couldn’t tell you cause in that sense, I always felt deeply dishonest cause I was able to, you know, represent myself in one way but I didn’t know what the heck I was doing. I didn’t know how I felt. And I didn’t, I didn’t understand how I felt really.

**Transracial Adoption and Adult Development/Experiences**

Throughout their interviews, participants addressed the role that race and culture have played in their adult relationships, as well as the impact of their transracial adoptee status on the choices they have made within adult educational and vocational realms of life. This domain yielded one typical and five variant categories. Many participants reported that their *important adult relationships have involved primarily White people.* Some participants shared a history of dating predominantly White men/women, reported having married a White partner, or stated that their social time is spent mostly with friends who are White. A variant group of cases reported the opposite, that *their important adult relationships have involved primarily people of color.* Individuals who endorsed this category married a person of color, attended a racially diverse college, or socialize with people of color. As participants discussed aspects of their adult lives, they shared ways in which their *transracial adoption has affected their educational and vocational interests* and how they have incorporated their *transracial adoption experience within their educational/vocational lives.* When asked about her feelings regarding her parents’ lack of acknowledgment of her race, one participant shared:
Oh, I think they did a very poor job. Again, that’s why I’m so adamant and enjoy being in the adoption field today because I can help families understand that’s the wrong way to do it and, um, you know, that there are so many more resources, in fact, that they can use today.

Another participant shared putting together a television program on interracial adoption while in college and yet another shared his participation on a committee addressing institutional racism and racial disparities for families of color.

Regarding planning to have their own families as adults, participants shared the importance of having children who share their biological/cultural background. They also spoke about how having or thinking about having their own family has increased the relevance of their birth culture. Thinking about cultural information and traditions he will be able to pass down to his children, one participant questioned:

What are we going to teach our kids? How are we going to teach them? Like, there’s a lot of gaps there for me still because, even though I learned about the history of everything from when I was 1 to 18, when you grow up, when you are three years old, what cartoons do they watch?...I don’t know nursery rhymes, I don’t know all the Colombian authors.

Reactions to the Interview

When asked about their process of participating in the interview, participants typically shared that it was a positive, enjoyable experience and had feedback/questions for the interviewer. A variant number of cases shared that they liked the questions but that the experience was challenging. They also noted their curiosity about others’ responses. One participant summarized a combination of these reactions as follows:
[It was] good, very good. Very positive. Uh, not something that I talk about a lot so it feels good but, you know, I feel…I don’t know, I don’t want to come off as, um, anti-Asian or whatever. I feel like, I don’t know, I’m having a hard time here. [It was] very positive, very happy, I think obviously I’m interested in this, I’m very interested to see how people, other people’s experience, yeah, and if I’m a complete jerk about everything and have a bad outlook on it.
Chapter V

Discussion

The history of family formation in the United States narrates a story where race and familial relationships are intimately intertwined—race has been a factor whereby the boundaries of family have been determined. Just decades ago, laws governing both marriage and adoption ruled that partnerships and families must comprise racially-similar people. Prior to 1967, anti-miscegenation laws barred individuals of different races from marrying each other. During this same time, adoption practice sought to match children with adoptive parents along lines of race, ethnicity, and religion (Jacobson, 2008). Following the 1950s, as White children became less available for White parents to adopt, domestic and international transracial adoptions grew in prevalence (Freundlich, 2000) and increased dramatically in the 1990s. The notion of similarity with regard to reference groups no longer demarcated family units, but the question remained as to how difference embodied within families would impact the well-being of its members.

Early transracial adoptions reflected the belief that within-family differences should be disregarded and that adopted children of color should assimilate into the White majority culture of their parents. The National Association of Black Social Workers voiced the first public outcry against transracial adoption in 1972, stating that White parents were incapable of teaching children of color how to deal with racist ideology (Briggs, 2003). The curtailment of domestic transracial adoptions that ensued following this debate only led to an increase in international transracial adoptions. Not until the early 1990s was the importance of adoptee identity referenced and recognized in adoption laws and treaties, leading to the development of culture camps, designed to help children develop cultural awareness of their country/culture of origin.
(McGinnis, 2003). Since then, adoption practice has reflected a greater openness with regard to acknowledgement of difference in family.

We see this openness reflected in images splashed across our magazines and television screens, where White celebrities hold the hands of their children of color, adopted domestically or internationally. We have grown more accustomed to this trend in family formation over the years, yet we lack knowledge about how an increasingly accepting social policy has affected the families of White parents adopting children of color. What are the degrees to which difference in race and ethnicity is accepted in transracial adoptive families? How is this acceptance demonstrated by White parents to their children of color? How have transracially adopted persons of color responded and reacted to these varying degrees of acknowledgement of racial difference? This chapter addresses the ways in which the results, outlined in the previous chapter, correspond to these questions and expand the findings presented in previous studies and literature. The chapter will be organized first according to the three research questions that guided this study: it starts with a discussion of families’ initiative (or lack thereof) to acknowledge racial difference among family members (research question one), and then moves to a commentary on the impact of this degree of acknowledgement on transracially adopted individuals (research question 2). Following this discussion, the thoughts and feelings transracial adoptees have about their own race and the race of their family will be reviewed (research question 3). Next, a comparison of this study’s results to the expectations initially discussed by the researchers will be presented. In the following section, implications for mental health practitioners working with pre- and post-adoptive White parents and transracially adopted persons of color will be outlined. Finally, the limitations of the current project, as well as suggestions for future research, will be described.
The Acknowledgement of Racial Difference in Transracially Adoptive Families

Research (e.g., Mohanty, Keoske, & Sales, 2006; Yoon, 2004) has documented the relationship between adoptive parents’ support for birth culture socialization and engagement in specific cultural socialization behaviors and positive psychological outcomes for adoptees of color. Johnson et al. (2007) found that greater engagement in cultural socialization practices by adoptive parents contributed to fewer delinquent and aggressive behaviors in Asian adopted youth. But are parents incorporating cultural socialization into their daily family routines?

Avoidance of Race-Related Topics

Most participants in this study shared that they experienced a great deal of discord in their families and that their adoptive families did not talk to them about race. Adult adoptees described keeping their emotional lives separate from their adoptive parents and/or siblings, and noted instances when their parents did not stand up for them in the face of racism perpetuated by extended or step-family members. Participants who stated that issues of race were not discussed in their homes indicated that their adoptive parents did not know how to initiate these conversations and so refrained from doing so.

The findings of this study, therefore, seem to support other recent results such as those obtained by Lee (2009). Lee also determined that White adoptive parents avoid issues of race and culture with their children. Lee examined White adoptive parents’ cultural socialization behaviors and efforts to prepare their Korean American children for racism. He found that both the parents and adolescents in his study reported that parents engaged in cultural socialization behaviors or efforts to prepare children for bias only “rarely to sometimes.” He also pointed out that parents rated their efforts as more frequent than their children did, and that efforts to prepare children for racism were even more infrequent than cultural socialization behaviors. In her
qualitative examination of White mothers who adopted children from China, Jacobson (2008) reported that approximately 20 percent of her sample of mothers did not engage in discussions about race with their children and, instead, espoused a colorblind perspective. Women in her study emphasized how they chose to see their children for the people they are, separate from their racial/cultural background. The 80 percent of mothers who felt differently shared that they did not have a choice in addressing Chinese culture in their homes because, for example, when their children look in the mirror they immediately recognize themselves as different (Jacobson, 2008).

Communication about difference within transracially adoptive families seems to be connected to the quality of relationships in these families. Although most participants identified ways in which there was closeness within their families, they also experienced discord, as stated above. Taking into account the narratives provided by the participants, it seems likely that the discord resulted in part from family members’ resistances to discussions about race and ethnicity—or, more specifically, their ignorance of racism in the lives of the participants. On the other hand, instances of closeness reported by the participants arose from parental participation in a search for birthparents or from resolving disagreements through open communication. One participant shared:

There are so many times in a family where shit that goes down and stuff goes under the rug and it just impedes you from having relationships or fuller or more whole relationships. I think because of adoption, because it’s out there and you can’t go around it, you can’t deny it, I think you address things more straight on, from a relationship standpoint, that is.
This participant indicated that in her family, the obvious racial differences compelled them to achieve a more open level of communication, leading to more satisfying relationships.

**Racial Make-Up of Communities**

Another way in which adoptive parents can behave in a manner aimed at strengthening their child’s awareness and connection to their culture of origin is by raising their child in a diverse community. In the current study, a greater number of participants reported having lived in predominantly White communities than having lived in diverse communities growing up. The participants who described growing up in White communities also reported attending mostly White schools. Previous research (e.g., Evan B. Donaldson Institute, 2009) supports the notion that many transracially adopted persons are raised in communities that lack diversity. In one of the only other studies outside of this project to obtain data from adult adoptees, the Evan B. Donaldson Institute of Adoption (2009) conducted a large-scale web-based survey of adults who had been adopted from Korea as infants/toddlers. They determined that 86 percent of their sample grew up in communities with less than 10 percent of Asian people. Thirty-nine percent of the respondents indicated that the community where they grew up was “not at all diverse.”

Research also has connected the level of diversity of an adoptee’s community to his ethnic identity. Song and Lee (2009) found that living in a diverse community was positively correlated with ethnic identity in a group of Korean adoptees. Researchers also have pointed to changes in community over an adoptee’s lifespan. The Evan B. Donaldson Institute study (2009) revealed that adoptees had more friends of their racial/cultural background as adults than as children. In addition, 47 percent of their sample reported more Asians in their adult communities and 42 percent shared that their current communities were “very much diverse.” These changes in community diversity may account, in part, for the changes in quality of family relationships
participants of this study reported. Some of the participants shared that their relationships with their parents improved over time. It is possible that by moving to a more diverse location, and surrounding oneself with racially diverse people, adoptees were less affected by the messages about race delivered to them by their parents. In other words, if an adoptee is raised in a home where race is not seen and in a community that is not diverse, the messages transmitted to him about race may have a more negative impact. Moving to a more diverse community may be a protective factor, in a sense, against messages that racial difference does not, and should not, matter.

**Parents’ Cultural Socialization Behaviors**

It is also possible that participants’ relationships with their parents improved as a result of greater cultural socialization behaviors enacted by their parents. Extant literature is divided on this issue, however, with some research (e.g., Berquist et al., 2003; DeBerry et al., 1996) suggesting that parents’ investment in cultural socialization wanes over time, while others (e.g., Scroggs & Heitfield, 2001) indicate parents became more involved in socializing their children as they got older. Contrary findings with regard to the effects of cultural socialization efforts may be related to the ways in which parents advocate for racial/cultural socialization. Vonk, Lee, and Crolley-Simic (2010) determined that adoptive parents are more likely to endorse activities that require the least amount of contact with people of the child’s race (e.g., reading books about their child’s race or celebrating holidays that reflect their race/culture) while they struggle the most with cultural socialization methods that require the most integration with members outside of their race (e.g., living in a diverse neighborhood). When making suggestions to prospective White transracial adoptive parents, most participants in this study advocated for the inclusion of the child’s birth culture in the adoptive family’s life. More
specifically, participants stated that parents should surround themselves and their children with people of their child’s birth culture and live in a diverse community. It appears that the cultural socialization endeavors that require adoptive parents to extend beyond their comfort zones are those that most positively influence adopted youth. Various cultural socialization practices may convey different messages to youth regarding their racial/cultural difference from the family. While sending one’s child to culture camp indicates a level of acknowledgment about his culture, it may also convey the message that that culture is not important enough to be acknowledged within the home. It is possible that behaviors that require parents to move out of their communities and join with people outside of their racial/cultural groups communicate to adopted youth that their culture is of the utmost importance, worth every effort to honor.

**Parents’ Messages About Race/Culture**

Research on transracial adoptive families has not explicitly addressed the messages parents deliver to their children about race, ethnicity, and racism. While extant literature makes assumptions about these messages through research on parents’ behaviors (i.e., cultural socialization endeavors), messages delivered by parents is not considered as a separate and unique variable. Even research that has addressed the source of racial bias and discrimination experienced by transracially adopted persons has not specified the messages transmitted through the behaviors reported as discriminating. The only other study that has inquired about experiences of discrimination among adult adopted persons identified discrimination as childhood teasing, and did not expound upon this variable to include other aspects of discrimination. Further, they did not identify adoptive parents as a source of discrimination (McGinnis, Smith, Ryan, & Howard, 2009).
Most studies examining racial/cultural socialization behaviors among parents, and the impact of these behaviors on adopted youth, measure racial/cultural socialization on a scale where a higher score represents greater engagement in these behaviors and no score represents no engagement in these behaviors. Research has shown negative psychological outcomes related to the absence of cultural socialization behaviors in transracial adoptive families. However, is this negative outcome due simply to the absence of behaviors? The current investigation contributes to the extant literature by identifying messages transmitted by adoptive family members through the presence or absence of socialization behaviors. Most participants in the study reported receiving the message “You aren’t different; I don’t see your difference.” In fact, all but two participants shared that their difference was seen as unimportant among their family members. Other participants shared that family members suggested “You shouldn’t associate yourself with your birth culture.” One participant noted that:

My family has always said, even my extended family, cousins and all, that they don’t even see that I’m Colombian. They’ve said that 100 times, 1,000 times to me. They just see me as being a brother, a cousin. They don’t even see that I’m Colombian.

He continued:

My dad would joke, you know, when asked why he adopted us. He would say it was because he wanted to get some color into the Swedish blood, you know, things like that.

When I was younger, I thought it was kind of funny. It’s not funny anymore.

Like this participant, other interviewees also described instances where racist jokes were told and laughed about in their presence; they also shared that they were advised to acknowledge their birth race/culture selectively (e.g., when it would help them gain acceptance to college). Even participants who endorsed the category, “My birth race/culture was incorporated into family life”
spoke of specific actions their parents took to make sure their culture was represented. These actions included sending culturally-appropriate magazines to one’s child, introducing children to culturally-appropriate books, cooking food from the child’s culture, joining associations comprised of other parents who have adopted transracially, and displaying cultural artifacts within the home. None of these behaviors required adoptive parents to socialize with people outside of their race or understand the meaning of their own Whiteness. The messages reported by participants in this study seem to parallel past research (e.g., Vonk et al., 2010) suggesting that adoptive family members avoid acknowledgment of racial difference, especially when this acknowledgment might cause them to question their own racial/cultural beliefs about being White.

**Meaning of Whiteness for Parents**

Although the focus of this particular study was not on the racial attitudes and understanding of difference among White adoptive parents, research and theory about race and racism provide a context through which we can make conjectures regarding adoptive parents’ recognition of race. It is possible that the parents of participants in this study avoided topics of race, as well as interactions with people of their child’s race, in an effort to maintain their White privilege and avoid examining any racist convictions they hold. Perhaps addressing racial difference in ways that would have been more meaningful to some of the participants would have put into jeopardy their own sense of themselves as racial beings. McIntosh (1988) described White privilege as “an invisible knapsack of unearned privileges,” privileges which enable White people to maintain positions of power in society but which remain hidden from consciousness. She posited that any recognition of power differentials rooted in racist ideologies would pose a threat to the ethical and just images many White people hold of themselves. White
individuals who purport a just and fair stance against racial inequality may harbor internal negative beliefs about people of color, which may be expressed subtly and exhibited through racial microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007). In an effort to avoid recognition of these negative beliefs, many White people will avoid interactions with people of color, in an attempt to avoid the idea that they could be racist—a practice coined by Dovidio and Gaertner (2004) as aversive racism. Avoiding the existence of racism appeared to be one way in which some adoptive parents of participants included in this study, according to the perceptions of the participants themselves, repudiated ownership of their own racist thoughts (whether overt or covert). As one participant shared:

My parents, my father especially, is not a believer in the different races…So if I bring something up or if I say, “oh, they’re probably going to look at me funny,” he thinks it’s absolute garbage that I even said that. He thinks that I’m putting myself down…So is he saying it to be the loving father or because he actually believes that? So he gets kind of annoyed if I harp on the fact that I’m a minority; he doesn’t like to hear it…Yeah, I don’t know if he’s saying it because he really believes that no minorities are treated that way, or White people don’t treat minorities that way?

In a study of White people’s awareness of race and racism, Smith, Constantine, Graham, and Dize (2008) found that White participants shared that race is rarely, if ever, discussed among family members or within social circles. White parents who adopt children of color may have been raised in a home where this typical avoidance of race or the existence of racial difference (i.e., colorblindness) was endorsed. The messages internalized by White adults may carry over into their roles as parents, even if they choose to adopt children outside of their race. Past research supports this claim, and speaks to the importance of better understanding messages
about race communicated by family members, outside of their efforts to teach their children about their birth cultures. Lee (2003) determined that a parent’s racial inculcation behaviors is not predictive of the extent to which they will talk to their child about issues of race and racism. Other scholars have concurred (e.g., DeBerry et al., 1996), reporting that even parents who engage behaviors to promote biculturalism for their children may deny the salience of race. Andujo (1988) revealed that Mexican American children raised in their birth families were more likely to live in diverse communities than Mexican American children raised in White adoptive homes. Further, although White adoptive parents in this study employed educational techniques to teach their child about his culture, they also tended to minimize the significance of race-related incidents, much like many participants in this study reported.

Conflicting Messages About Race

Existing literature tells us that White adoptive parents who engage in cultural socialization behaviors do not necessarily also transmit messages that race is seen and that the acknowledgement of racial difference is important. Participants in this study indicate that typically, adoptive family members communicate that their child of color is not different and, thus, their race is not seen. Despite efforts made to incorporate aspects of the child’s culture in the home, racial/ethnic differences were often minimized and racist jokes were sometimes told. One might argue that race was not addressed/discussed within the home because adopted persons of color did not have interactions with others where race was a salient factor. Perhaps parents did not engage in conversations about race because race was not an issue for their children of color? The present study indicates that this was not the case for most participants who shared their personal stories. In fact, most participants revealed ways in which race was a central force in struggles they endured outside of their family homes. When speaking about their interactions
with people in their schools, communities, and society in general, three messages were identified as received by most of the participants of the study: “You don’t belong here,” “What are you?,” and “You are different and inferior.” One participant noted:

It started off minor with kids just asking where you’re from, like that’s always been the question my whole life. But especially when you’re a kid. Cause they immediately recognize, okay, well, you’re not from your adoptive parents. Because my mom was White with red hair and freckles, and my sister and I are very dark skinned so, I mean, especially in the summer, so I guess I remember those moments. “Where are you from?” and then we’d have to say Bogota, Colombia, and then explain we were adopted. And sometimes it would just end there. But oftentimes it wouldn’t…it would be more questions. And the next, of course, would be “who are your real parents?” and explaining well, we didn’t know them. And then people surmising well, all we know about Colombia is drugs and coffee so you must be related to drugs and coffee. And so have to deal with that and, in essence, that is a form of racism because it’s very narrow-minded and stereotypical.

While participants received messages at home indicating their racial/cultural difference did not matter and could be overlooked, messages received from their communities indicated the opposite. Experiencing such conflict has important mental health implications for transracially adopted persons, which will be discussed in a later section. For now, we will turn to the data to better understand how participants described dealing with this conflict. More specifically, how did participants respond to race-related messages and incidents when most of them were raised in a colorblind home.
The Impact of Acknowledgment/Lack of Acknowledgment of Race by Adoptive Parents

Participants in this study did not endorse one primary reaction to race-related incidents; several responses were identified to indicate ways in which participants coped with the messages they received about race. Despite the variability in categories (i.e., all categories within the domain documenting adaptations and reactions to race-related encounters were variant), one can still make hypotheses and draw conclusions from the data. A quick review of these categories indicates that many participants employed negative coping mechanisms to deal with race-related incidents. For example, participants spoke about using substances, responding with anger, experiencing anxiety, being confused, learning to conform to social expectations, avoiding people of their birth culture, and isolating themselves. These categories, representing over half of the categories in the domain, also indicate that participants dealt with race-related experiences largely on their own.

Individualistic Coping Strategies

Another way of stating this observation is that the mechanisms that participants of color used to deal with the racial messages that they received occurred on an individual level, and contrast therefore with the collectivist coping strategies often associated with African American, Latino, and Asian cultures. Research on culturally-sensitive mental health practice for people of color often points to the importance of community and family networks/Familismo in dealing with stressors, particularly race-related stressors (e.g., Constantine, Redington, & Graham, 2009; de las Fuentes, 2007; Ye, Su, Kim, & Yancura, 2009). Utsey, Giesbrecht, Hook, & Stanard (2008), for example, found that coping with racism was a salient family issue among African Americans and that the use of cultural resources (such as religion) was correlated with familial resources. They stated: “Transmitting the values, norms, morals, and beliefs needed to survive in
a racist environment begins with the family, and racial identity development and affirmation continues in the context of sociocultural organizations (e.g., the Black church)” (p. 59). People of color successfully employ collectivist coping strategies because they are socialized to do so through exposure to the cultural norms of their families and communities of color. The participants of this study—people of color raised in White homes—were obviously without these socialization experiences, and so also were without the coping resources they engender. In the absence of family and community knowledge and support of racial bias, this study’s transracial adoptees were left to deal with racism on their own. In this way, it appears they assumed coping strategies valued in White culture, where independence and individualism are valued.

Accordingly, none of the strategies discussed to deal with issues of race and racism reported by participants of this study incorporated family or community. In fact, even the adaptations/reactions that indicated healthier, proactive coping mechanisms were individualistic in nature. These included becoming more aware of one’s birth culture, confronting others about racial/cultural issues, working to increase one’s own self-esteem, and seeking out therapy. When relaying her reaction to her parents’ minimization of racial difference, one participant described the following:

I feel like if a parent doesn’t acknowledge that their child, you know, you can’t live in a color free world because the fact of the matter is, there is color and there are different ethnicities. And, so, to ignore that is to say, “oh, it’s not special” or “oh, it’s not important.” And I know people think to say “it’s not important” is a good thing…when they say “race is not important to me” they’re saying “I’m saying it’s not a bad thing, like the fact that you’re Black, I don’t think that it’s bad that you’re Black.” But, on the flip side of that, you can acknowledge it and say, “it’s a good thing you should be proud of.”
And so I think that’s where people really drop the ball. Because I think to not acknowledge it, it really confuses the child. And so, for me, it created a lot more…I think it made me a lot more confused…it could have contributed to a lot of [my coping strategies] whether it be drinking or partying…and then ultimately why I just left home…you know, putting your kid in a Black daycare is not going to give them what they need. Because you’re still coming home to a White household so, I mean, I think to just not talk about it, and not celebrate it, is to create confusion.

This participant’s words convey the impression that her confusion could have been ameliorated by discussions about race in the home. She stated that providing resources of cultural socialization outside the home is not enough and can, in fact, perpetuate the invisible division that many participants spoke about, where their race is seen outside but not inside the home. Such messages correspond to expressions of colorblind racism in that, by ignoring the racial differences that exist within the home, parents renounce transracial adoptees’ experiences as recipients of racial injustices both in familial and societal contexts. For those participants who received predominantly colorblind messages from family members and messages of discrimination from members of their community, it may have appeared that the only solutions left by which to cope with racial difference and racism were those they could engage in on their own.

**Coping Resources Available at Family and Community Levels**

By denying transracial adoptees the opportunity to address and process racial issues within the home, adoptive parents may not only contribute to the confusion in adoptees’ lives, but also deny them the chance to feel heard and supported within their family environment. However, although research has pointed to the importance of collectivist coping strategies for
people of color, most of the studies documenting this finding have examined samples of people of color often living in diverse communities (e.g., Utsey et al., 2008; Yeh, Inman, Kim, & Okubo, 2006). Many transracially adopted individuals are distinct from other persons of color given that the elements of their microsystem (e.g., family, church, neighborhood, peers, school; Bronfenbrenner, 1979) involve primarily White people and not people of color. As such, encouraging a Black transracially adopted child to make use of the Black community by attending the Black church, as an example, could be perceived as a push from family members to keep issues of race outside of the family system. With regard to transracially adopted persons, the meaning of effective and culturally-appropriate coping strategies may be different from those vital to White communities and those vital to communities of color. Research has found that the coping skills African American family members pass along to their children to help them cope with racial discrimination include a healthy paranoia or cultural mistrust of European Americans (Thompson, Neville, Weathers, Poston, & Atkinson, 1990). Such mistrust might not be so healthy for transracially adoptive children whose own parents are White, and it may not facilitate their ability to deal with race-related encounters. Yet, without this healthy paranoia, transracial adoptees of color might possibly be more susceptible to negative psychological outcomes as a result of the racism perpetuated by White people.

Akiba and Garcia Coll (2004) advocated for a contextual approach to better understand how children of color deal with race-related messages. They proposed an interactive model that described the various elements/social positions in a child’s life and their interactions with each other. Within this framework, elements of individual, family, and community would interact differently for transracially adopted individuals than for other people of color. Chun, Moos, and Cronkite (2006) also believed that the environmental system shapes the cultural resources
available to people and the manner in which people are able to access them. Transracial adoptees of color do not share experiences of racism with their family; thus, the individual family interaction is different for them than it is for other people of color negotiating race-related incidents. Given the White cultural norms of individualization in combination with White adoptive parents’ limitations in preparing their children for racism, transracial adoptees may be socialized to deal with race-related encounters on their own. However, what is the impact of this coping strategy as transracial adoptees move from predominantly White communities to communities of color, or move from identifying as White to identifying with their birth race? Once in a more diverse community, transracial adoptees of color may be less prepared to utilize community resources and support available to them, since collectivist coping has not been the norm for them. By dealing with racial issues in ways (i.e., individualistic coping strategies) that contrast from those valued in communities of color (i.e., collectivist coping strategies), transracial adoptees of color may feel even more distant from their birth race/cultures. As a person of color utilizing White cultural coping strategies, these transracial adoptees neither fully fit in with their White counterparts nor their counterparts of color. A common theme to emerge in the current study was that of not fitting in or belonging anywhere. It is possible that this feeling of not belonging is also related to how transracial adoptees cope with race-related encounters.

**Seeking Support from Communities of Color**

It also is possible that transracial adoptees will not be welcomed by people of color whose support they seek out as adults, after having moved to more diverse communities. This, too, could further distance them from their birth race/culture. Living in predominantly White communities as children, it appears some transracial adoptees learn to deal with negative
messages received about their race on their own. This coping strategy is reinforced by White parents who do not seek out and involve persons of color in the life of their child of color. When experiencing race-related stress, transracial adoptees in this predicament have no organizations, groups, or communities to turn to consisting of racially-similar people who share similar race-related stress. According to Akiba and Garcia Coll’s (2004) contextual model for coping, these transracially adopted youth cannot rely on their family or community to fully understand their race-related experiences and, as such, negotiate them on an individual level.

As transracial adoptees grow older and develop more interest in their birth culture, they may choose to attend diverse colleges or move to more diverse communities. In order to deepen their connection to their birth culture and race, they may decide to engage in social activities with racially-similar peers, activities that represent the cultural values of their birth family. As they become more aware of themselves as racial-cultural beings, and as their exposure to racism and forms of racial oppression (such as racial microaggressions) increases, they may seek out external resources for support now made available to them given the racial and cultural diversity of their community. At this point, transracial adoptees might try to activate the organizational level of the model proposed by Akiba and Garcia Coll (2004). However, as “newcomers” to these sociocultural organizations, transracial adoptees of color might not be supported in the same way others who have been raised in connection to these organizations would be. A study examining the experiences of Black women “transplants” in Oregon helps us to understand how access to coping resources might be affected by one’s longevity in a community (Terhune, 2008, p. 554).

Terhune (2008) conducted a qualitative analysis to examine the experiences of 14 self-identified Black women who, in adulthood, moved to a predominantly White community (i.e.,
Oregon) from a predominantly Black community. She found that the women reported feelings of cultural and social isolation, not only from the White community in Oregon, but also from the Black community (consisting of individuals of color who were raised in Oregon). The women reported feeling unwelcomed by White and Black locals, and also cited experiences where they were the recipients of racial microaggressions and blatant racist behaviors. In her interviews, Terhune determined that the women in her study coped with social isolation and negative racial messages in two primary ways: 1) by creating communities of support with other Black women who moved to Oregon in adulthood, and 2) by relying on positive racial socialization messages (received in their childhood communities). The participants, being new to the community, were not welcomed into the community groups/establishments where Black locals gathered and supported each other. Instead, they were left to form their own community group, consisting of Black women who were new to the area. Further, upon encountering resistance from the local Black community, these participants had their families and networks of support in their hometowns to fall back on. Findings from this study shed some light on the experiences of transracial adoptees and support the notion highlighted by some participants of the current study who felt unwelcomed in communities of color they entered as adults. One Asian/Black biracial participant commented on her immersion into communities of color, reflecting on her continued discomfort within Korean communities and her feelings regarding her participation in Black communities. She shared:

I mean, to this day, I’m still pretty…I’m extremely uncomfortable with my Korean culture. I want to know about it badly but I’m very insecure about it, about approaching Koreans or, you know, anything about being Korean. But, even still within the Black community, it’s still a little tough because, even though I feel that I’m still comfortable
with it, I don’t know, since I didn’t grow up there, you know, most of my friends are Black but I still have a lot of White friends, and it’s just not having had the same experiences that my friends [of color] have had, even when it’s just little things like, “oh, yeah, my grandmother did this.” And, you know, every person of this decent, every Black person’s grandparent did this. And, I mean, [it’s a generalization] but people generalize like that. And, it’s just like, I’m just like, well I didn’t have that experience. And people look at me like I’m crazy. So culturally, it was tough. Trying to find my identity like that and I’m still working on that now. I think it’s something that I will always struggle with.

This participant described difficulties that could emerge for transracial adoptees who seek more collectivist-based supports as adults after having coped with race-related incidents primarily on an individual basis throughout childhood. As “transplants” to diverse communities, these persons of color may not feel as strong a sense of belonging or support from sociocultural organizations in their communities. Perhaps connection to these organizations earlier in their lives would facilitate their ability to utilize them as coping resources as adults, and thereby strengthen their connection to their birth race/cultures. Future research should attempt to identify in more explicit ways what coping strategies are most effective for this population. It seems for transracially adopted individuals, involvement of White parents in dealing with issues of race and racism (i.e., the family level) is the first step to healthier coping strategies, and to accessing more culturally-valued sources of support (i.e., the community level).

**Desire to Search for Birth Family**

Participants’ comments regarding the experience of searching for their birth families further support the involvement of adoptive parents in negotiating racial difference. Within the
domain describing respondents’ relationship with or knowledge about their birth family, only one typical category emerged. Intriguingly, this category represented participants who reported having no desire to search for or connect with their birth family. This finding is notable given other categories that emerged from the data, including participants’ recommendation that adoptive parents increase their child’s awareness of their birth culture (a typical category), their identification with their birth race/culture (a typical category), and their hope to grow closer to their birth culture/race (a typical category). Research examining rates of search for birthparents among adoptees confirms that not all adopted persons want to search (e.g., Tieman, van der Ende, & Verhulst, 2008) and that the desire to search for birthparents is different from the desire to know about one’s birth culture (Muller & Perry, 2001). As Wegar (1997) put it, “the need to know is not necessarily the same as the need to search” (p. 66-67). The lack of desire to search among participants in the current study could be related to the type of adoption that participants had: all participants in this study had closed adoptions. Thus, those who did search for their birthparents likely encountered significant challenges along the way.

Participants’ decisions regarding search, according to their narratives, were influenced by their level of emotional maturity, the perceived pain associated with the process, and the inaccurate information that they had (likely a result of the closed adoption process). Some of these reasons parallel those identified in other studies, namely the pain associated with the process (e.g., concern of upsetting birthparents’ lives; fears of failing; fears of being rejected; concern about unpleasant information; Baden & Wiley, 2007). It also is possible that, by the time of the interview, participants felt more acknowledged by at least some family members as racial/cultural beings. Past research (e.g., Stein & Hoopes, 1985) has indicated that adoptees who chose to search were raised in homes where their adoption was not discussed openly or
where they experienced family discord. Narratives of the participants in the current study
challenged this finding, perhaps indicating that other experiences filled the racial/cultural void
that was initiated through lack of knowledge of or contact with birth families. Many of the
participants had their own families in which race and culture were salient factors; this may have
reduced their need to search for birth family in order to feel connected to their race/culture. The
results of the current study appear to indicate that the preferred mechanism by which participants
wanted to gain knowledge about their birth culture was through their adoptive family, and not
necessarily through reunification with birth family members. In fact, participants never
expressed a desire to have racially-similar parents; they instead talked about their wish that their
adoptive parents would address race with them. Even when this did not happen, some
participants spoke about how they ended up learning about racism on their own and claimed that
their racial difference gave them greater sensitivity to and a broader understanding of other
people and cultures, in general.

**Relationships and Pursuits in Adulthood**

As adults, participants seemed to employ healthier coping mechanisms to deal with the
experience of being racially different from their family, as evidenced by comments made about
how their transracial adoption status impacted their educational and vocational lives. When
discussing their adult lives, many spoke about selecting diverse colleges to attend and working in
social services to educate others about issues of race. Others sought connection to their birth
culture by having their own biological children so that they could raise them with their cultural
morals and ideals. For most participants, their important adult relationships involved mostly
White people; less than half of the participants shared that their adult relationships involved
primarily people of color. In describing their adult relationships, participants acknowledged the
life-long nature of their journey to make sense of their racial difference. One participant shared that he dated primarily White women and married a White woman because, at that time of his life, relationships triggered intense feelings about his physical appearance.

My first girlfriend, I remember feeling…she was Jewish, she was dark, dark hair, darker skin and, I felt good around her but I remember this, at the same time, I felt completely disconnected from my body. And, you know, that was a piece about having a relationship with a woman. It was an awakening to me in the sense that there’s something wrong with my relationship with my body.

This participant’s reflection about how difference embodied in his physical appearance impacted his sense of self speaks to the next area brought to light by participants’ stories about their own experiences.

**Participants’ Feelings About Their Race and the Race of Their Adoptive Family**

Like the participant quoted above, other participants shared experiences when they noticed their racial difference with moderate to severe discomfort. Most participants shared times in their lives where they felt uncomfortable around or unaccepted by people of their own race or rejected by White people. One participant shared that he was made to think something was wrong with him and another spoke about feeling shocked by how out of place she felt in a diverse community. Similarly, most participants shared the feeling of not belonging anywhere in particular. As one participant put it, “everyone and no one embraces you.” Other groups of participants spoke about periods of time when they rejected their birth culture or felt uncertain about their racial/cultural identity so tried to please others to fit in. A participant adopted from Korea shared: “When I was younger, I guess I didn’t think about race at all. So that the whole mix…ethnicity never crossed my mind or, at least, presented any difficulties. When [it became...
more clear], I didn’t like being Asian. You know, I wanted to be, I guess, White. Not necessarily blond, just not that different.”

Many participants also described times when they noticed their racial difference with little or no discomfort. Some participants spoke about how calling to mind the racial difference in their family made them feel grateful for the opportunities they have been given. One participant stated that “Colombia’s not really a great place…it’s dangerous, so I always felt very privileged and very lucky, I guess. You know, as opposed to someone who was just born into a family like that.”

**Participants’ Feelings About Race According to Racial Identity Models**

In terms of racial identity designations, most participants identified with their birth culture but another group of participants identified with their adoptive culture (i.e., identified as White). A couple of others stated that they did not hold a specific racial identity. The variability in results regarding the thoughts and feelings that transracial adoptees have about their race speaks to the variability inherent in stage/status models created to illustrate racial identity development (e.g., Baden, 2002; Cross, 1978; Helms, 1995; Steinberg & Hall, 2000). These models rest on the notion that race is a sociopolitical construct that emerges from systems of power and oppression. According to Helms’ racial identity statuses for people of color (1995), those participants who identify as White or reported times from their development when they wished to be White represent the conformity status where a person of color devalues his own group and subscribes to White standards. The Cultural-Racial Identity Model (Baden, 2002) would place these participants either in the pro-parent racial identity or pro-parent cultural identity statuses. Participants’ narratives also represent the dissonance status described by Helms (1995) where a person of color recognizes differences and similarities within racial groups but
remains confused or ambivalent regarding to which socioracial group he belongs. Participants who spoke about confusion regarding their racial identity would likely fit within this status. Participants who then shared moments in their life when they rejected their adoptive family’s culture and sought out people of their birth culture would fall into Helms’ immersion/emersion status and Baden’s pro-self racial/pro-self cultural identity. Transracial adoptees’ feelings about race reported in other studies also can be mapped onto the identity statuses of Helms’ model for people of color. For example, McGinnis and colleagues (2009) found that Korean adoptees progressed from wanting to be White to experiencing discomfort with their birth race to accepting themselves as Asian American raised by White parents.

A Gap in Racial Identity Theory: The Feeling of Not Belonging

While the current data can be partially understood through current racial identity models, none seems to provide a thorough explanation of our participants’ experiences. First, Baden’s model (2007) takes into account individuals’ identity across dimensions of parent race, parent culture, adoptee race, and adoptee culture. She asserted that transracial adoptees can, thus, align with one of 16 different racial/cultural identity statuses based on the degree to which they embrace their birth versus adoptive culture and their birth versus adoptive race. Participants in this study did not distinguish clearly between race and culture when describing their feelings about racial identity but, rather, used these two constructs interchangeably. It is possible that the meaning of race and culture for transracial adoptees is complexly intertwined. Although this notion has not been addressed extensively in the research, an initial study examining Baden’s model (Baden & Steward, 2007) also determined that race and cultural dimensions of identity were highly correlated for transracially adoptees.
Given the unique social location of transracial adoptees as persons of color who are members of White families, it seems appropriate and necessary to specify a model to frame the various complex identities that can take shape. Baden and Steward (2007) determine one’s racial/cultural status based on their knowledge, awareness, competence, and comfort regarding their birth culture, their adoptive culture, and other cultures. An adoptee who is comfortable with, aware and knowledgeable of, and competent with his own culture and that of his parents is said to have a bicultural identity. One who is more comfortable, aware and knowledgeable of, and competent in his birth culture has a pro-self racial identity. These individuals prefer contact with people of their birth culture and may have been raised around people of their birth culture. The opposite of a pro-self racial identity would be a pro-parent racial identity, seen in transracial adoptees who are more comfortable with and knowledgeable about White culture. Finally, an undifferentiated racial identity represents a transracially adopted person whose identity is a fusion of comfort with, awareness and knowledge of, and competence in multiple cultures. This adoptee may have been raised in a diverse community and exposed to people of multiple different cultures. It is their connection to multiple cultures that prevents them from distinguishing between their adoptive and birth race identities.

Looking more closely at Baden’s racial-cultural identity model for transracial adoptees, it is difficult to find a status that accurately depicts the experience of some participants in this study, more specifically, those who spoke about not having a place in either their birth or adoptive cultures. Although the model allows for complexity in identity for transracially adopted persons beyond the dichotomy of identifying as either White or a person of color, each status indicates a comfort level or identification with at least one racial/cultural group. What then would be a person’s identity status if she is unable to comfortably identify with any one group?
As an example, one participant shared the following challenge of being a transracially adopted person:

You know, I can never, I’m never going to look White, so I can never fit into a White world totally. And I’m never Black enough because people tell me, you don’t sound Black and, at times, you don’t act Black (I’m still not sure what that means). And so it’s consistently getting messages that, you know, where I don’t fit in, I don’t have a group that I belong to. And again, for adolescents, that’s kind of a key developmental stage of identifying who you are and who you belong to and having peers with some of the same social identity and similar likes and dislikes so, at times, it was pretty tough…I think it’s a lifelong process because there’s always experiences of, you know, where I’d never totally fit. So there’s never a full comfort level with being in one situation or the other.

Additional research is needed to further examine the racial-cultural model for transracial adoptees. According to the data collected in the present study, it appears that revisions to the model might be necessary to better capture the typical experience of feeling discomfort with both one’s adoptive and birth races/cultures.

Like the participant quoted above, other participants shared the sentiment that the meaning and feelings associated with transracial adoption evolve over time. This finding is in accordance with other literature, specifically that which documents the life-long nature of identity development amongst transracial adoptees. In a study examining Korean adoptees, McGinnis and colleagues (2009) found that the importance of racial/ethnic identity increased from high school (67% reported it was “important/very important”) to college (76% reported it was “important/very important”) and into young adulthood (81% reported it was “important/very
important"). Taken together, these findings stress the importance of continuing to collect data from adult transracial adoptees in future research.

**Feelings About Race and One’s Body**

Feelings about race also were intimately connected to feelings about one’s body. One participant shared that without opportunities to socialize with people of his birth culture, he was not able to value or grow into his body type. He added, “I found that I couldn’t feel it at some point and I don’t know why.” This same participant described the shift in his own sense of being that came with a deeper understanding of his racial identity and his racial difference from the dominant culture. He shared:

I felt differently about my body in a way. And I actually started to feel like I was inhabiting my body. Somehow I could feel it again. Just a little bit. Just a wee bit. Um, that I could say, I don’t look like you, the rest of you. And you know that. And it does make a difference to you, how I look. Um, and it makes a difference to me how you look. You know, that was probably a type of awareness change. A shift.

It took this participant over 40 years to feel at one with his body in a way where he could develop awareness and settle into comfort around his racial identity. Again, a status better reflecting the inability to inhabit one’s own body—a very basic level of discomfort—is missing from the current models on racial identity for this population and is needed if we are to truly understand the complexity of experiences for transracially adopted persons. The next section will contrast the findings of this study as discussed above with the expectations that were noted among research team members at the start of the project, before any participant interviews were read or analyzed.
Comparison of Results and Research Team’s Expectations

In their discussion of expectations of biases preceding the data analysis, each research team member reported the belief that White adopted parents should address issues of race with their children of color. At the same time, team members expected that adoptive parents would struggle to discuss issues of race with their children. Data supported this expectation, but in a more significant way than anticipated: most participants experienced their parents as struggling to address race with them to the point where their parents did not even acknowledge race or their racial difference. Two team members expected that participants’ difficulties negotiating racial difference would depend upon their racial/cultural background—specifically, Black transracial adoptees would experience more challenges with the racial difference in their families than Asian transracial adoptees because the racial difference in their families would be more noticed and, thus, they would be less accepted by society. This type of data did not emerge in this study due to the nature of the methodology—themes are identified across data limiting the comparisons that can be made among different groups of participants. One team member felt that participants would identify as either White or a person of color, and that there would not be fluidity in this identity. Although categories emerged where participants identified either as White or a person of color, their narratives indicated fluidity in this identification, in terms of uncertainties regarding belonging and group membership. The changes in group identification also seemed dependent on various factors throughout their lives (e.g., demographics of their community, race of friends and colleagues). One team member expected skin color to be a salient topic to emerge. Findings did not confirm this hypothesis, though the importance of physical appearance was noted as a defining feature of being a transracially adopted person among some participants. Lastly, research team members discussed the meaning of transracial
adoption as represented by the media. Members expected that, given the increasing prevalence of images of transracial adoption on celebrity news shows and in popular magazines, participants would comment on these shifts. Interestingly, participants did not focus on transracial adoption as represented by the media. One participant did mention that transracial adoption is perceived as “more cool” today’s day in age and how she wishes it was perceived this way when she was growing up. Since this was the only case represented in this category, however, the data was not reported (in line with CQR guidelines).

In retrospect, the findings that we anticipated seem to have been endorsed by participants in this study, specifically those regarding the importance of addressing race within transracially adoptive families and the difficulties participants witnessed in their parents regarding this acknowledgement of racial/cultural difference. Where the results far surpassed the expectations of the research team members was in the complexity of the experiences illustrated by the participants in their narratives. Participants’ reflections were not binary (e.g., race was not seen as either important or unimportant) but reflected layered meanings in the ways events and incidents were interpreted, and how participants were impacted by them. Participants spoke about how awareness of their racial difference caused them mild distress at times and major distress at other times. They spoke about ruptured family relationships and ways in which their families reflected closeness. Participants’ narratives illustrated moments when racial difference was not salient and moments when the impact of racial difference became so significant they experienced their bodies in new and unfamiliar ways. Research team members did not foresee at the start of the project the extent to which complexities arose in the experiences of transracial adoptees as they built an awareness and understanding of race and racial difference throughout their childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.
Mental Health Implications

This section provides recommendations to mental health practitioners working with individuals who have been transracially adopted or parents who have, or are considering, transracially adopting a child. Suggestions will be provided to assist counselors in making effective interventions, forming appropriate conceptualizations, and building awareness of their role in the room with these clients.

Working with White Transracially Adoptive Parents

The findings of this study underscored the importance of the relationships between adoptive parents and transracially adopted youth, as well as the quality and content of their communications. Adoptive parents were identified as necessary and important vehicles through which messages about race and culture and difference are transmitted. Further, participants of this study narrated various ways in which decisions made by adoptive parents in their youth had an impact on their burgeoning sense of themselves, their educational and vocational pursuits, and their relationships and family life in adulthood. It seems essential that the conversation about clinical work with transracially adoptive families include implications for counseling adoptive parents due to the primary role they play in the issues that these families face. Focuses of treatment could include pre-adoptive and post-adoptive counseling for parents, as well as family therapy for parents and their transracially adopted children.

Counseling work with post-adoptive parents could involve collateral sessions where the adoptee is the identified client and the sessions with parent(s) supplement this work. Or, work with parents can involve ongoing treatment with the parent as the identified client. Mental health counselors working with a White adult who is considering transracial adoption, or who has already adopted transracially, must understand parents’ thoughts and feelings regarding race, as
well as their reasons for adopting transracially. It is possible that their reasons for adopting transracially will shed light on their understanding of racial dynamics and systems of oppression.

**Understanding parents’ reasons for adoption.** Some participants in the present study recommended that pre-adoptive parents consider their reasons for adopting transracially. One participant shared:

> If you do something for someone, it should be because you want to do it and not for a thank you. And not because you want to win the grace of whatever God you believe in. It should just be you’re going to do something. And whatever the consequences are, you’re going to do your best. And you’re not doing it for a thank you, and for praise, and for people to respect you more or to win bonus points or because you’re going to get a special seat in heaven or something.

Crolley-Simic and Vonk (2011) analyzed data from interviews with White mothers who adopted children from Asian countries. This study is unique in that there is a dearth of literature examining the reflections on race of adoptive parents. These researchers reported that many mothers in their study identified as religious and felt that their transracial adoption was God’s plan for them. It is possible that such a belief could interfere with culturally-competent parenting practices raising a child of color, particularly if doing “God’s work” prevents them from acknowledging or attending to the challenges that arise in a multiracial family. If one subscribes to the belief that God placed a child of color in the family—that it was meant to be—a likely subsequent belief could be that “she is one of us.” This line of thinking could serve to minimize the differences that exist within the family, particularly between the adoptive parents and the adoptee of color. At the same time, religious affiliation could serve as an important supportive resource in the lives of adoptive parents, as they confront normative struggles that arise in their
families. Therapists must be careful to work with parents to harness this potential coping mechanism and source of support while also being mindful of the ways in which religious beliefs hinder reflections upon differences amongst family members. In addition, parents’ spirituality and connections to religious institutions could also be used to initiate a dialogue about the cultural and reference groups. If parents identify strongly with a particular religion, and cherish the sense of belonging that their sense of membership to this group affords them, they might be able to better understand their child’s need to connect with or belong to their racial/cultural group.

**Understanding parents’ racial awareness.** Vonk (2007) found that strong religious beliefs among White transracial adoptive parents often contributed to their resistance to bring cultural customs into their home. She also found that when parents’ religious beliefs conflict with their cultural competencies, they held a colorblind approach to race. Crolley-Simic and Vonk (2011) identified this approach as one of four to which mothers in their study subscribed. The other three identities included ambiguity (mothers who recognized oppression exists but were uncomfortable with their own feelings about race), holding multiple perspectives (recognition of different races and sensitivity to their child’s struggles), and coming together (an awareness of White privilege and desire for more socially just practice). Mothers in their study did not shift in their racial identity types; it appeared raising a child of color did not serve to create the internal conflict necessary to fuel a shift from a less culturally-centered identity status (i.e., colorblindness, contact status) to a more culturally-aware status (i.e., coming together, integration status). Although this study’s sample is particularly small, it reminds us that, as therapists, working with adoptive parents to expand their racial/cultural awareness is no small task. Mental health practitioners must meet parents where they are at in terms of racial identity,
and recognize that this might be the first time they have been challenged to question systems of oppression and racial hierarchy and their own perpetuation of these systems. Adoptive parents could feel quite threatened by dialogue around their White privilege; thus, if a counselor presses the issue too firmly, she could risk a premature termination.

Mental health practitioners must familiarize themselves with the difficulties associated with racial dialogues, especially for White people. First and foremost, many White people fear being labeled as racist, realizing their racism, and confronting their White privilege (Sue & Constantine, 2007). The potential implications that this label would have for a White person raising a child of color are clear: White adoptive parents who share ways in which they endorse racial stereotypes or ways in which they have discriminated against people of color to maintain their position of power might fear having their child taken away from them.

**Understanding parents’ experiences of loss and marginalization.** Most parents who have adopted transracially have done so after struggling with infertility (Fisher, 2003) and have likely gone through a lengthy and complicated process to be approved as adoptive parents. Pressure to maintain an image of the perfect parent may be paramount in these particular families. Further, as clinicians, we also must attend to the ways in which White transracial adoptive parents feel marginalized in their family roles—first as adoptive parents and second as parents of an interracial family (Friedlander, 1999). As some participants in this study recommended, White transracial adoptive parents need to be prepared for the challenges they will face, such as looks of disapproval for others. Working with these parents, clinicians can assist them in identifying stigmas associated with their doubly marginalized parental status and in exploring any external judgments that have been internalized and which might affect their parenting and relationship with their child. Mental health practitioners also can assist their
clients in becoming more culturally-competent by taking their time with conversations about race, providing psycho-education about White privilege and racism, and allowing a sense of safety emerge in the treatment.

**Addressing racial/cultural bias.** Assisting parents in confronting their own beliefs and biases regarding race and culture will lay a groundwork from which their efforts to engage in cultural socialization practices will be more meaningful. Data from this study and other literature indicate that the most helpful racial socialization strategies are those that allow adoptive children to be around people of their birth culture such as moving to a more diverse community or cultivating meaningful relationships with people of their birth culture. A participant in this study suggested that parents should “have an experience of being a minority in a situation—those kinds of experiences should be put forth for people who are going to adopt a kid of another race to give them a sense of understanding it…and not being afraid to talk about race.”

Mental health counselors should familiarize themselves with adoption advocacy organizations where White adoptive parents might be able to participate in support groups. Practitioners also should familiarize themselves with groups and workshops that specifically focus on issues of race and culture. For example, The People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond (www.pisab.org) organizes workshops around the United States called “Undoing Racism” to assist people in talking about race. A participant in this study shared how meaningful it was to him when his mother attended this workshop at his request. For parents who are considering adoption, however, this would be an important preventative step. And, because the People’s Institute is not affiliated with adoption organizations, more specifically the business of adoption, this may be a safer context in which to verbalize real, perhaps unconscious, biases and
stereotypes. Mental health practitioners also might start their own groups to address issues of race and culture with adoptive parents or pre-adoptive parents with whom they work. Counselors could facilitate dialogues on racial messages received by their parents when they were growing up and might engage members in exercises to cultivate their understanding of White privilege (e.g., the privilege exercise; McIntosh, 1988). Research (e.g., Lee & Grotevant, 2003; Vonk & Massatti, 2008) has identified a correlation between transracial adoptive parents’ participation in post-adoption support groups and their cultural competence. Further, Vonk and Massatti (2008) found a small negative effect of pre-adoption and post-adoption training related to race and culture on the cultural competence of transracially adoptive parents. This reported ineffectiveness of trainings run by adoption agencies to increase the cultural awareness and competence of transracially adoptive White parents makes support/process/discussion groups led by mental health counselors even more essential.

**Addressing limitations in preparing children for racism.** Participants of this study recommended that parents prepare children for the challenges they will face, and mental health counselors can assist parents in realistically approaching this task. In other words, a therapeutic environment can provide a context for White adoptive parents to share feelings that emerge from the limitations imposed on them by their race in terms of preparing their children to face racism. Mental health practitioners can help parents recognize the scope of their capacities to prepare their children for the race-related challenges they will encounter; they also can assist them in developing appropriate expectations for themselves as White parents. Samuels (2009) noted that transracially adopted persons often have the experience of not being Black enough or White enough (as an example), an experience echoed by some participants in this study. Transracial adoptees are often not only faced with racial bias in White communities but also in communities
of color. She says that, “in addition to preparing children to cope with racism, a central tenet of racial socialization, parents must also anticipate the ways in which their child’s whiteness may be stigmatized in the Black community” (p. 92). Samuels (2009) studied transracial adoptees who also identified as multiracial, but her use of Whiteness in this quote could also represent the Whiteness symbolized by transracial adoptees’ membership to White families. Work with parents could assist them in recognizing the ways in which negative messages about race could be internalized from both White communities and communities of color. Suggested methods to help children externalize rather than internalize negative race-based messages include: openly discussing race, connecting with individuals who deal with racism, and modeling a stance of intolerance for racism of any kind (Vonk, 2001). These techniques help bring issues of race and racism into the home, as it is often not enough to incorporate the child’s culture by attending culturally-appropriate festivals or events (Andujo, 1988). Vonk (2001) asserted that it is the combination of racial awareness (i.e., developing awareness of racial beliefs), multicultural planning (i.e., connecting one’s child to his birth culture), and survival skills (i.e., preparing one’s child for racism) that enable White adoptive parents to parent their children of color in culturally competent ways.

It is important to note that communication about racial difference can take various shapes and forms and does not necessarily translate into a one-time dialogue about race with one’s child. Rather, addressing racial difference within the family is more nuanced and entails actions that convey parents’ willingness to take on a bicultural family identity. Participants advocated that prospective White transracially adoptive parents increase their awareness of their child’s birth culture. To do this, parents do not necessarily need to engage their transracially adopted child in a conversation about racial difference. Rather, they can demonstrate their racial awareness and
honor their child’s birth culture through actions that their child can notice, without having to be directly involved. For example, parents can cook foods representing their child’s culture or learn the history of their child’s birth culture. Adopted parents whose children were born in a Spanish-speaking country can also learn to speak Spanish and can bring this language into the home. Transracially adopted children may show no interest in participating in these endeavors and may, in fact, reject efforts made by parents to incorporate their birth culture into the home. Continued involvement of White transracially adoptive parents in aspects of their child’s birth culture, however, sends the message that racial differences are acknowledged and various cultures are celebrated. Thus, when their child is faced with a race-related issue, their home environment will be a safe space for them to share and address it. Mental health counselors can encourage parents to be creative in the ways they model a bicultural family identity to their children.

Mental health practitioners can further assist parents by being aware of how culturally-competent attitudes and behaviors may present challenges specifically due to the negative feelings that are triggered as a result. A part of being a culturally-competent parent includes acknowledging racial/cultural difference within the family and attending to the confusion their child likely experiences in grappling with this racial difference. Pavao (1998) reminded us that parents often blame themselves for their child’s confusion. Thus, acknowledging the depth of their child’s confusion could lead to feelings of inadequacy on the part of the parent. This, in combination with openly discussing the differences in their family, serves as a constant reminder that this family was formed through adoption and that their children have different birth parents.

When working with adoptive parents, it is important to normalize these feelings of inadequacy and acknowledge the great responsibility placed on transracially adoptive parents in their unique social location raising a child of a different race. Mental health practitioners can
accomplish this not only by attending to the struggles encountered by transracially adopted persons and their parents, but also by recognizing the strengths inherent in the family. Some participants in this study described feeling deeply appreciative of their adoptive parents. Taking this into account, therapists can listen for efforts parents are making to build racial awareness in their home and speak to the strengths and internal constructive forces (Horney, 1950) parents are utilizing to do so.

Reports also indicate that most parents adopt due to infertility issues (69%; Fisher, 2003). Mental health practitioners should be aware that asking adoptive parents to address issues of difference may trigger deep-seated feelings of loss which adoptive parents have yet to deal with. Therapeutic treatment could assist parents in coping with these feelings of loss and, thus, make them more emotionally equipped to help their children negotiate racial/cultural difference.

**Working with Transracially Adopted Persons**

“The greatest gift that one can give children is to tell them their truths and to help them make sense of these truths, especially when they are complicated and harsh,” noted Pavao (1998, p. 98). As mental health practitioners working with transracially adopted individuals, we, too, are called to honor and recognize a most salient truth that exists for them—namely, their racial/cultural difference from their family members. Kirk (1964) asserted that the most healthy family situations are those in which there is an acknowledgement of difference. Acknowledgment of difference was stressed by all of the participants in the study and emerged in various categories throughout the domains (e.g., in suggestions made for White transracially adoptive parents, and in messages that participants received from adoptive family members and others). Through accepting difference, individuals in the lives of transracially adopted persons can recognize the losses in their lives (e.g., the loss of being raised by people of one’s
race/culture) and begin to address the void created through such losses. Bach (2001) wrote that a mother “becomes the muse of a child’s past, present, and future, helping to reintegrate memories at each higher level of development” (p. 753). He also stated that a parent can harm a child “by not constructing or holding that child’s memory or representation in a particular way” (p. 751). He stressed that preserving a child’s memory and threading various memories together contributes to a healthy sense of self, while “forgetting” such memories could lead to discontinuities within the self. The participant who felt uncomfortable in his own body throughout his developmental years reflects a type of discontinuity/fragmentation within the self. His notion of forgetting seems to parallel the notion of not acknowledging difference in transracially adoptive families. Ignoring difference is “forgetting” that one’s child has a different race/culture. Lifton (2001) referred to this as the concept of “broken narratives” for transracial adoptees and says it can lead to hopelessness if professionals do not assist clients in piecing together these broken pieces. As mental health practitioners, we bear some of the responsibility, in addition to adoptive parents, to recognize and attend to racial and cultural differences. For us, as counselors, this happens relationally within the context of treatment.

**Approach issues of race and culture...using clinical judgment.** First and foremost, we must be committed to our own development as culturally competent clinicians. In formal and peer supervisions, counselors working with members of the transracially adoptive population need to identify their stereotypes and biases about both White adoptive parents and children of color who were adopted transracially (as members of the research team did at the start of the present study). Next, counselors must be comfortable addressing issues of race and culture within the therapeutic context but must do so with great tact. Growing up in a society, and possibly a family environment, where people are conditioned not to address race, it is possible a
transracial adoptee will not initiate a dialogue about race in therapy. Further, it is possible that the magnitude of racial/cultural issues in the adoptee’s life have been masked in the service of preserving an image of the adoptive parents as effectively responsive to their needs. Clinicians should be curious about the impact of racial/cultural issues in a way that is not accusatory to adoptive parents. In addition, clinicians must be mindful of the transference dynamics that are present with their client and use caution not to assume how their client views them as racial/cultural beings.

For example, as a White clinician, I cannot assume the degree to which a transracial adoptee views me as different. Some participants in the present study identified as White and, therefore may feel more racially/culturally similar to a White therapist. On the other hand, those participants who identified with their birth race/culture might be aware of more difference within the therapeutic dyad. Instead of approaching conversations about race from a place of knowing, counselors should seek to understand the complex ways in which they see similarities and differences in the treatment room. In terms of transference, this understanding will help mental health practitioners formulate hypotheses regarding the role of trust and mistrust as the counseling relationship develops. If a transracial adoptee identifies as a person of color and feels unseen by White members of her community, she may approach the therapy with preconceived notions that her White therapist will also “not see” her. Counselors should be patient in working with transracial adoptees and couch their dialogues about race, culture, and racism according to the trust that develops over time. As Lee (2009) pointed out, “another aspect of cultural competence is the mindful stance of the therapist simultaneously holding both the awareness of racial context(s) and yet not becoming too committed or attached to it where it can inadvertently silence the client” (p. 80). Relying on the client to raise these issues, however, is not
recommended as it might replicate the invisibility surrounding race they experience in their home environment.

Some participants in the current study suggested that White adoptive parents should embrace the child’s culture but not force it on them. Counselors need to be sensitive to the cues of their clients, as well as engage them in age-appropriate conversations about race/culture. For adolescents who struggle to verbalize their feelings about race and racial difference, and for young children who do not cognitively have the words to express themselves, art therapy can be a safe way to engage topics of identity and difference.

**Address conflicting feelings and messages.** Mental health practitioners are in a vital position to help transracial adoptees recognize and negotiate internal conflicts that could potentially influence their mental health in negative ways. Seemingly contradictory categories (e.g., family discord versus family closeness and feeling grateful) emerged within the data and reflect the complex and layered realities of transracial adoptees. Adoptees might find, for example, that their simultaneous anger and gratefulness towards their adoptive parents is disorganizing and disorienting. Mental health counselors can assist transracial adoptees with holding multiple feeling states at once, and recognizing the truths represented by each feeling state. Another powerful contradiction highlighted in the present study is that of racial messages received from family versus those received from people outside of their family. Most participants described receiving messages of sameness from their families and messages of difference from others. Others simply questioned the race and ethnicity of participants themselves, offering various guesses and assumptions (as reflected in the category, What are you?). For some participants, this uncertainty was internalized, propelling their own uncertainty about their group membership and confusing their sense of belonging. These questions and
conflicts are important to address in treatment. By working with transracial adoptees to provide voice to these conflicts, they can begin to deal with them in more effective ways. In the absence of such work, transracial adopted persons may feel they have no outlet to express their anger about both not being seen and being seen as racially inferior. In these cases, they might turn their anger on themselves and experience self-hate.

**Interpret symptoms within a context of race-related encounters.** The present research helps us to better conceptualize diagnostic symptoms represented in many transracially adopted clients. Most importantly, it serves as a reminder that transracial adoption does not directly contribute to pathological states for transracial adoptees. Through examination of the categories that emerged through the analysis of participant interviews, one can see that participants discussed feeling hurt, anxious, and angry; isolating themselves socially; using substances; and conforming to social expectations. On the surface, any client presenting with these challenges or symptoms might receive a diagnosis of depression or anxiety. This diagnosis might then inform the treatment goals and objectives of the therapy. However, the analysis revealed that each of these “symptoms” emerged as responses and reactions to race-related events. Thus, they appear to be strategies participants used to address negative race-related experiences and encounters. Conceptualizing the case of a transracial adoptee in this way, the therapeutic work changes shape and is no longer focused on a straightforward treatment of depression. Rather, it becomes about exploring their reactions to racism and their sense of self, and assisting them in identifying more effective coping strategies. Understanding the context of behaviors among transracially adopted persons also decreases the stigma of this type of family formation, as it reminds us not to overpathologize youth who simply are attempting to cope with messages they receive from others. Continually attending to the seven core issues of adoption
will assist mental health practitioners in framing presenting concerns and symptoms within a normative context of transracial adoption. These issues are rejection, loss, guilt, shame, grief, identity, intimacy, and mastery/control (Silverstein & Rosa, 1999).

**Attend to the lifelong issues of transracial adoption.** Lastly, the present study indicates that issues of identity in transracial adoption are life-long. A transracial adoptee will not necessarily resolve identity issues during childhood and adolescence; in fact, some identity issues and challenges may not even emerge until adulthood. As a result, each of the recommendations made for mental health practitioners working with transracially adopted youth apply to working with transracially adopted adults. Although further from the point in their lives when they were relinquished by birthparents and adopted by their White adoptive parents, transracial adoptees receive messages about their race and group membership throughout their lives. When working with adults, however, clinicians need to take caution not to refer to or about their clients as adopted children. Scholars (e.g., Baden & Wiley, 2007) have documented that people tend to use this label throughout the lives of adopted person; in the context of therapy, this could be experienced as infantilizing.

**The Use of Family Therapy**

The modality of family therapy itself conveys an important message to transracially adopted youth. In the context of family therapy, the family as a unit holds the identified challenges of any one member. Rather than labeling a member of the family as the identified patient, the family as a whole becomes the patient. This transmits a powerful message to the transracially adopted youth in that the adoptive parents accept some level of responsibility for the difficulties experienced and do not attribute them to the child’s difference. Furthermore, this modality becomes a prime context for modeling effective practices for addressing racial/cultural
difference within the family. Participants of this study supported findings from previous research that, while racial socialization endeavors such as sending one’s child to culture camp or a cultural-specific festival is beneficial to the development of a healthy identity for transracial adoptees, the incorporation of the adoptee’s race and culture within the home is even more salient. As such, by addressing issues of race and culture within the context of family therapy, as opposed to sending one’s child for individual therapy, parents are demonstrating that they see race and that they are willing to understand racial difference not as “Your race is different from mine” but as “Our races are different from each other.” In this way, challenges around race, culture, and identity are conceptualized as a systemic issue involving the whole system.

Friedlander (1999) suggested that family therapy is particularly effective with transracially adoptive families when adopted youth report symptoms of depression and social isolation, as opposed to grief, because this symptomology indicates challenges with marginalization more than adoption-related challenges. This is consistent with participant data from the current study as feelings of hurt and anxiety and movements to isolate oneself socially emerged within the domain, adaptations and reactions to race-related experiences. As each member shares aspects of family functioning that could improve, a clinician can highlight the role of racial and cultural difference in the experiences of each member. In the context of family therapy it is important to distinguish between labeling a child’s differentness as the source of a “problem” versus acknowledging the normative struggles that adoptive families face due to their unique structure (which includes differences). A goal would be to assist the family in constructing and taking on a bicultural identity, where cultural and racial difference is negotiated by and within the family such that a more stable family identity can emerge. Friedlander (1999)
asserted that family therapists can conceptualize members as in a “cultural transition;” thereby understanding their so-called problem as a normal developmental task to be achieved (p. 57).

To facilitate dialogue amongst family members, parents could be encouraged by family therapists to share their experiences being raised by their own parents. Were there particular sociocultural customs, traditions that were celebrated? Adopted youth could follow, sharing the questions they have about their culture of origin. Parents and children could work together to identify ways in which they could integrate their races and cultures through various customs, routines, and practices within the family. In this way, they can write a new narrative for their family, one that takes on a bicultural lens (Rampage et al., 2003).

**Implications for Training**

The lack of training around specific adoption-related issues has been well-documented within mental health literature (e.g., Porch, 2007; Sass & Henderson, 2007). Attempting to understand this void in clinical training, some adoption scholars (e.g., Henderson, 2007) have suggested that it is due to the nature of adoption practice as embedded within business and legal domains. If society acknowledges mental health needs within the transracial adoptive population, then they are admitting the regulations and principles governing adoption laws to be faulty. This is clearly illogical, however; such an argument would imply that extensive mental health concerns reported by clients living with their biological families would dictate that laws should be made to prevent couples from having biological children.

The absence of clinical training concerning transracial adoptive populations, as well as the prevalence of research on psychological outcomes of transracial adoptees, symbolizes our society’s fixation on conceptualizing transracial adoption as either a good or bad child welfare practice. However, just as with any other method of family formation, transracial adoptions have
unique characteristics which translate into a unique set of rewards and challenges experienced by its members. The intent of the present research was to identify these unique variables so that individuals can better assist transracial adoptive families in negotiating difference, as any other family needs to in other ways. It is the responsibility of those charged with training mental health practitioners to incorporate all different types of families into their clinical training, as the unique characteristics of various families inform the work that is most effective with them. An essential part of this training would include the acknowledgement of racial and cultural biases among clinical trainees, as well as the other two essential elements of multicultural-competent treatment—knowledge of cultural values and culturally-appropriate skills (Sue & Sue, 2003). In addition, trainees should be encouraged to explore their biases and expectations specifically related to various types of families.

Limitations of the Study

As with every research study, as much as the researcher attempts to stay true to the methodological parameters of the study, some limitations must be acknowledged. First, the findings of the present study may be limited by the characteristics of the sample. It is possible that experiences of transracially adopted persons differ in significant ways based on the race of the adopted person, and that these nuanced differences were masked through inclusion of all adoptees of color in the study. By including all transracial adoptees who identified as a person of color, the sample included both internationally and domestically adopted individuals. Although the sample in the present study met the criteria outlined by Hill and her colleagues (1997; 2005), the small number of participants limits the conclusions that can be made regarding within group differences among transracially adopted people.
Next, the type of transracial adoption of participants could have impacted the amount of information they obtained about their birth family and their birth culture, both due to legal stipulations of international versus domestic adoption as well as physical distance between adoptive and birth families, depending on the culture of birth of the adoptee. Given the focus of the study on adult adopted persons, those who participated in the study were adopted during a time when birth records were primarily closed and the emphasis on birth cultures and birth families was minimized. Each of the participants in the current study had a closed adoption. As a result, resources available to them to learn about their birth culture and associate with people of their birth culture were more limited than they are for individuals whose adoptions were open or semi-open. The philosophical stance of adoption practice also has shifted in recent years. Although adoptees still lack access to their birth records in most states across the United States, there is a stronger emphasis on culture in parent trainings provided by adoption agencies.

It is impossible to fully distinguish the impact of racial/cultural difference from the impact of adoption in general. There is no clear demarcation pinpointing where one’s experience of adoption ends and the experience of transracial adoption begins. Although this study’s interview questions focused on the rewards, challenges, and experiences associated specifically with the differences in racial and cultural backgrounds inherent in transracially adoptive families, findings must be interpreted within a context of the overall experience of adoption. For transracially adopted individuals, the experience of adoption, in general, and transracial adoption, in particular, intersects and cannot be clearly teased apart, since one (transracial adoption) is embedded within the other (adoption). Thus, comments made by participants regarding their understanding of racial and cultural differences may be influenced in some ways by their broader experience of being raised by parents outside of their birth family.
Participants in this study were recruited through snowball sampling conducted by reaching out to various organizations offering support and engaging in advocacy efforts for transracial adoptees. As such, it is possible that the participants in the current study had more extensive experience addressing identity issues with other people. Further, the impact of whatever social support these participants received from the agencies and organizations with which they had contact could have influenced their narratives and life experiences. Further, findings also may be limited by the process of interviewing participants. In an effort to include stories from adopted persons across the country, phone interviews were conducted in addition to in-person interviews. Participants may have been more or less forthcoming in sharing their experiences based on the proximity of the interviewer.

Another limitation of the study includes an element of the methodology itself. Through the use of quantitative frequency labeling of the categories that emerged from the data, researchers were better able to identify themes across the data. In their description of CQR methodology, however, Hill and her colleagues (1997) dissuade researchers from including categories pertaining to one participant (i.e., those labeled as rare). While this guideline is meant to prevent researchers from drawing conclusions based on limited data, it is possible that important aspects of participants’ experiences are left out of the study’s results. Finally, although CQR procedures allow for checks on researchers’ biases and expectations, and our research team was scrupulous in adhering to these, it is still possible that idiosyncratic perceptions on our part influenced our interpretation of the data.

**Future Directions for Research**

The data analyzed in the current study was gathered from a racially-diverse group of transracial adoptees. Themes that emerged illustrate how transracial adoptees of color negotiate
racial difference in their families, in general, without specific attention paid to the impact of unique racial/cultural backgrounds on transracial adoptees’ experiences being raised in White homes. Future studies could build upon this foundation by examining how racial difference is addressed within specific racial groups of transracial adoptees (e.g., Asian adoptees of White parents, Black adoptees of White parents, Latino adoptees of White parents). This research should include the experience of multiracial adoptees as a group of transracial adoptees of color. There is very little research (e.g., Samuels, 2009) that addresses the unique experience of identity formation among transracially adopted persons who also must negotiate two birth races/cultures. Future research could elaborate on the current findings by using CQR to analyze the narratives of groups of transracial adoptees based on their racial group. If these groups are interviewed in the same manner, and with the same research protocol, the domains and categories could be compared across groups. More specifically, if similar categories emerge, gaps between frequency levels would indicate potentially significant experiences between groups. This set-up of CQR also would allow for qualitative comparisons between White adoptive parents and transracial adoptees. In fact, the current study could be replicated with White adoptive parents, with a similar research protocol. Given the inconsistent results of the existing quantitative research, where data is collected either from young adoptees or through parent reports, it would be interesting to compare parent and adoptee perspectives through qualitative analysis. Further, there is limited research directed to the experiences of White adoptive parents. Additional research sampling White adoptive parents would bring further credence to the current findings in this area.

Additional research could examine coping strategies employed by transracial adoptees to determine which coping mechanisms yield the most health identity development in terms of race
and culture. Researchers could focus not only on the coping strategies used but also on the cultural relevance of these coping strategies in order to help increase the cultural competence of clinicians working with transracial adoptee clients. Regarding racial identity, more research is needed to understand the various racial identity statuses transracially adopted persons occupy at various points throughout their lives. Clarifying the elements of these statuses, as well as potential conflicts that drive individuals from one status to another, will enable theorists to fine-tune the racial identity models used to better understand transracially adopted persons.

While racial and cultural differences are significant within the experience of individuals of color adopted by White parents, the other differences that are represented in these families are extensive. Additional research is needed to better understand how transracial adoptees understand and negotiate other cultural differences within their birth and adoptive families, for these differences likely intersect and influence each other. As one participant shared:

Well, surprisingly enough, not during college but during grad school, I had this Black woman who, like, got on me about—she didn't say this, but I knew what she meant—like, being too White. That my friends were White. At least in grad school there weren't many Hispanics, believe it or not. I went to NYU. And so, um, I remember her just like acting like, you know, like having a chip on her shoulder like, “you act like you're better than everyone else.” And like it was synonymous with being White. And it was like, “but I'm not.” But it reminded me that, you know, as much as I want to be Hispanic or am Hispanic, obviously, like, I still was raised White. And then, I'm in the middle upper class group. So it’s just, you just can't get away from that, per se.

This participant brought up her social class and began to speak to how others’ perceptions of her class status affected how they perceived her racially. Examining these perceptions and the
intersections of race and class in this population (especially considering the notion that birth families tend to be from less privileged classes than adoptive families) is a necessary step towards working more effectively with these clients.

Participants identified ways in which the meaning of their adoption and relationships with adoptive family members changed over time. As a result, future quantitative studies examining various outcome variables within transracial adoptive families may yield more rich and informative results if they use adult adopted persons as sources of data. Longitudinal research following adoptees from childhood into adulthood also may yield more realistic findings concerning the experiences of transracially adopted persons. Overall, participants had many suggestions for transracial adoptive parents and enjoyed telling their stories, indicating that there is a great deal more we can learn from additional qualitative inquiry of this population.
References


Lee, R. M., Grotevant, H. D., Hellerstedt, W., Gunnar, M. R., & The Minnesota International


Appendix A
Demographic Questionnaire

Age: ________

Gender: ________________

Race: ________________

Ethnicity: ________________

Highest Degree Attained:
   _____  High School
   _____  Bachelors
   _____  Masters
   _____  Doctoral
   _____  Medical Doctorate
   _____  Certificate in Specialty – please specify: ____________________

Community in which you grew up:  Urban _______     Rural _______    Other  ________
Community in which you live now:  Urban ______    Rural _______    Other  ________

Birth parents

Race of birthmother: ________________

Race of birthfather: ________________

Ethnicity of birthmother: ________________

Ethnicity of birthfather: ________________

Siblings

Number of siblings in your home: ________

Number of siblings in your home also adopted: ________

Number of birth siblings: ________

Number of birth siblings also adopted by your adoptive parents: ________
Race of siblings in your home (mark number of siblings of each race below):
Black ________  White ________  Asian/Pacific Islander ________  Latino/a ________
American Indian/Alaskan Native ________

Adoption Information

Age at adoption: ________

Country of birth: ___________________

Type of adoption: (please circle one)
Open  Semi-open  Closed

Number of placements prior to adoption: ________

Type of placement(s) prior to adoption (please circle all that apply):
Kinship  Orphanage  Foster care  Birthparents  Other ________________

Age of adoptive parent 1 at adoption: ________

Age of adoptive parent 2 at adoption: ________
Appendix B
Interview Protocol

1. What are the circumstances surrounding your adoption?
   a. Where were you born?
   b. At what age were you adopted?
   c. Who comprises your adoptive family?
   d. Did you have contact with your birth family growing up?

2. What has it meant to your life to be an adopted person?

   Possible follow-up probes:
   a. What has been the most challenging aspect of being adopted transracially?
   b. What has been the most rewarding aspect of being adopted transracially?

3. When did you first realize that you were a different race than your adoptive family?
   a. What was that experience like for you?
   b. What role did your family play in that experience?

4. How did you understand race and racial difference throughout childhood and adolescence?

   Possible follow-up probes:
   a. What did you know about your race?
      i. What was taught to you by other people?
      ii. How else did you learn about your race?
   b. What was your relationship to White people growing up?
      i. What influence did other people in your life have in how you felt about
         White people throughout your development?
   c. What was the racial make-up of your school growing up?
      i. How did this affect how you understood race?
   d. What was the racial make-up of the community you lived in?
      i. How did this affect how you understood race?

5. How was your race incorporated in your family growing up?

   Possible follow-up probes:
   a. Who acknowledged your race? How was it acknowledged?
   b. Did the way in which your family addressed racial difference change over time?
   c. Did the extent to which your family acknowledged your own race as different
      from theirs affect you? If so, how? How has it influenced the person you are
      today?
   d. Was there a difference in how your racial differences were addressed versus
      ethnic differences?
6. Did people have race-related reactions to you as you were growing up? If so, what were they? How did you feel when they happened?

7. How do you currently understand your racial identity?

8. How would you describe your relationship to your adoptive family growing up?

9. How would you describe your relationship to your adoptive family now?

10. How do you feel about the way that your adoptive family did or did not address race?

11. What suggestions would you give White parents who are considering adopting a child of color?

12. What has the experience of this interview been like for you?

   Possible follow-up probes:
   a. Is there anything regarding your experience as a transracial adopted person that I have not inquired about that you feel is important?
   b. Are there questions you found more relevant to your experience than others?
   c. How did you feel responding to these questions throughout the interview?
   d. What was it like to have a White person who is not a member of the adoption triad ask you these questions? Do you feel it influenced the way you responded?
Table 1
Domains, Categories, and Frequencies*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domains</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Label</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Relationship with/knowledge of birth family</td>
<td>I have no desire to search for/connect with my birth family</td>
<td>Typical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I received information about my birth family</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I have an interest in searching for/Found my birth family</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Search requires emotional maturity</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inaccurate information or secrecy regarding birth family</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I was rejected by my birth family</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Connection with my birth family is/would be painful</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Childhood experiences with adoptive family</td>
<td>Family discord</td>
<td>Typical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My family was close</td>
<td>Typical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I grew up in White schools/communities</td>
<td>Typical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My adoptive family did not talk about race</td>
<td>Typical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My adoptive family addressed race</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I grew up in diverse schools/communities</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parental relationship has improved over time</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I feel gratitude for my adoptive family</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I felt special</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My adoptive family changed my name</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I was left out of childhood peer groups</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I have an adopted sibling</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My adoptive parents were unable to have the children they wanted</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Race/racial messages received from adoptive family</td>
<td>You aren’t different; I don’t see your difference</td>
<td>Typical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You shouldn’t associate yourself with your birth culture</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Racist jokes and comments were made in my adoptive family</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The significance of racial and ethnic differences was minimized</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I was advised to acknowledge my birth race/culture selectively</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My adoptive family supported the acknowledgement of my race/culture</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My birth race/culture was incorporated within family life</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
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</table>

*(table continues)*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domains</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Label</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. Race/racial messages received from others</td>
<td>You don’t belong here</td>
<td>Typical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What are you?</td>
<td>Typical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You are different and inferior; Experiences of racial discrimination</td>
<td>Typical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>People like you are…Assumptions based on racial stereotypes</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>That can’t be your family</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You are lucky and should be grateful</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Your difference isn’t a big deal</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Personal meanings and feelings associated with transracial adoption</td>
<td>I don’t fit in anywhere</td>
<td>Typical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The uncertainty associated with an absence of biological information/connection</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Separation anxiety/fear of rejection</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning about racism from personal experience</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The importance of physical appearance</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Greater perspective and broader understanding</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Being grateful</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The meaning has evolved over time</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Adaptations and reactions resulting from race-related experiences</td>
<td>I experienced confusion</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I used substances</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I was angry</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I felt hurt and anxious</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I isolated myself</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I learned to conform to social expectations</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I became aware of my lack of knowledge about my birth culture</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I avoided people of my birth culture</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I became proactive in learning about my birth culture</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I confront people about racial/cultural issues</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I worked to increase my self-esteem</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I got therapy</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Race hasn’t been a significant issue in my life</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Suggestions for White transracial adoptive parents</td>
<td>Increase your own and your family’s awareness of the child’s birth culture</td>
<td>Typical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Incorporate people of your child’s birth culture within family life</td>
<td>Typical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Embrace the child’s birth culture but don’t force it</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Be open to dialogue and questions</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(table continues)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domains</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Label</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>7. Suggestions for White transracial adoptive parents (cont.)</strong></td>
<td>Recognize that race matters                                               Variant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prepare children for the challenges they will face                        Variant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Be prepared for the challenges you will face                               Variant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Know your reasons for adopting transracially                              Variant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>8. Experience of own racial identity</strong></td>
<td>There were times when I noticed my racial difference with moderate to severe discomfort</td>
<td>Typical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>There were times when I noticed my racial difference with little or no discomfort</td>
<td>Typical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I hope to learn about other cultures and grow closer to my birth culture</td>
<td>Typical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I currently identify with my birth culture/race                           Typical</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I currently identify with my adoptive culture/race                       Variant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I have rejected aspects of my birth culture                               Variant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I identified racially as White                                            Variant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I have felt uncertain about my racial/cultural identify so I tried to please others/fit in</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I don’t hold a specific racial identity                                  Variant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>9. Transracial adoption and adult development/experiences</strong></td>
<td>My important adult relationships have involved primarily White people     Typical</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My important adult relationships have involved primarily people of color  Variant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My transracial adoption has affected my educational and vocational interests</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I have incorporated my transracial adoption experience within my educational/vocational life</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Having/thinking about having my own family has increased the relevance of my birth culture</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It’s important for me to have children who share my biological/cultural background</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>10. Reactions to the interview</strong></td>
<td>It was a positive, enjoyable experience                                   Typical</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feedback/questions for the interviewer                                     Variant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I liked the questions                                                     Variant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It was challenging                                                        Variant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Curious about others’ responses                                           Variant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* General (12 to 13 cases), Typical (7 to 11 cases), Variant (2 to 6 cases)