

Perceptions of Racial and Cultural Development  
in Young Adult Transracial Adoptees

by

Dena M. Moore

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*Barbara Flom, Ph.D.*

Barbara Flom, Ph.D.

The Graduate School  
University of Wisconsin-Stout

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**The Graduate School  
University of Wisconsin Stout  
Menomonie, WI 54751**

**Author:** Moore, Dena M.

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**Abstract**

Since the early 1970's, parents in the United States have adopted nearly a half-million children from overseas; the majority of these children have come from Asian countries, and the rest from Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Africa (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2009). Because of the wide variety of geographic areas from which adoptees originate, transracial families are becoming more prevalent in the United States.

According to Boylston (2001), along with transracial adoption come issues regarding race and identity that children must face as they grow older. The purpose of this study was to identify the many challenges transracial adoptees potentially face throughout their childhood and adolescence in regards to identity development.

The results of the study found that half the participants received little to no exposure to their biological culture as children while the other half of participants received moderate exposure. All participants believed it is important for adoptive parents to avoid pushing the

adopted child's biological culture on them. The majority of the participants also believed school counselors could be very beneficial to adopted students.

**The Graduate School  
University of Wisconsin Stout  
Menomonie, WI**

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## Chapter I: Introduction

Transracial adoption means placing a child from one race or ethnic group with adoptive parents who are from another race or ethnic group. If referring more specifically to the United States, transracial adoption means placing a child of color with a Caucasian family (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 1994).

In recent years, transracial adoption has become a popular choice for many individuals and families. People choose to adopt transracially for a variety of different reasons. Due to changes in the United States regarding abortion and birth control policies, there are not as many Caucasian babies available for adoption. Additional reasons for transracial adoption include adoptive parents feeling a connection to a particular race or culture because of their ancestry or personal experiences (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 1994). Many prospective adoptive parents just want to raise a baby and the child's race is not a factor in their decision to adopt.

Since the early 1970's, parents in the United States have adopted nearly a half-million children from overseas; the majority of these children have come from Asian countries, and the rest from Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Africa (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2009). Because of the wide variety of geographic areas from which adoptees originate, transracial families are becoming more widespread throughout the United States.

Many people have very different views of transracial adoption. Critics of transracial adoption state that children available for adoption should always be placed with a family consisting of at least one parent of the same race or culture as the child. Supporters of transracial adoption believe that race should not be considered at all when selecting a family for a child. To these people, all that matters is that children go to loving and supportive families (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 1994).

According to Boylston (2001), along with transracial adoption come issues regarding race and identity that transracial adoptees must face as they grow older. These important issues can impact a child's identity and sense of self. As transracial adoptees grow up, they begin to see obvious physical differences between themselves and their adoptive parents. These children are very likely to ask questions once racial and cultural identity issues begin to formulate.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Experts have suggested there are many challenges facing transracial adoptees. However, few studies actually provide the perspective of adopted individuals. A study needs to be conducted to identify the numerous challenges transracial adoptees go through during identity development as children and adolescents.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to identify the many challenges transracial adoptees potentially face throughout their childhood and adolescence in regards to identity development. The study addressed cultural socialization of transracial adoptees by their adoptive parents, feelings the adopted child may have toward his or her biological culture, the level of commitment by the adoptive parents to their child's biological culture, and the implications for school counselors.

### **Research Questions**

There are four research questions the study attempted to answer. They were:

1. What is the importance of cultural socialization to transracial adoptees?
2. What feelings do transracial adoptees express toward their biological culture as a result of being raised by white parents?



3. What should the level of commitment by the adoptive parents be to the child's biological culture?
4. What types of challenges do transracial adoptees bring to school counselors?

### **Importance of the Study**

This study is an important tool for transracial adoptees because it can help them understand and put meaning behind some of the identity issues they may have had as children and adolescents. The research is useful for adoptive parents because it provides information about culturally socializing their transracial adoptee and the impact parents own viewpoints and opinions can have on their child's thoughts about his or her birth culture. The study also addresses commitment levels by adoptive parents to their child's biological culture. Additionally, the information covered in this study will be beneficial for school counselors when dealing with transracially adopted students.

### **Definition of Terms**

In order to comprehend the research on transracial adoptees and their families, frequently used terms must be recognized and understood.

**Biological culture** refers to a collective expression for all behavior patterns acquired and socially transmitted through the customs, traditions, and language of an individual's place of birth.

**Colorblind** refers to individuals who do not perceive racial differences and racism as prominent issues (McRoy & Zurcher, 1983).

**Cultural socialization** refers to the manner by which parents address ethnic and racial issues within the family (Lee, 2003).

**Transracial adoption (TRA)** is defined as the adoption of a child of one race by one or two parents of a different race (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute).

### **Limitations of the Study**

Due to the specific focus of this study, the information given applies only to a limited sample of transracial adoptees and their families. The majority of participants were from the same ethnic group and all participants were residents of the Midwest. The findings do not necessarily apply to same-race adoptees or to other groups of transracial adoptees.

Additional qualitative limitations of this study include that it was an exploratory investigation and did not test a hypothesis or use a random sample. Also, the themes were derived from iterative reviews of transcripts by the investigator; another reviewer may have discovered different themes. A final limitation of this study is that of possible researcher bias. The researcher herself is a transracial adoptee. The researcher was also both the interviewer and the sole data analyzer.

### **Assumptions of the Study**

An assumption of this research study was that all of the resources used pertaining to transracial adoption were accurate, having passed through either peer or editorial review. This study also assumed participants answered honestly, felt no coercion by the researcher, and represented only their own experiences and perspectives.

## **Chapter II: Review of Literature**

This chapter will review the literature available on transracial adoption. The chapter will begin with a brief history of transracial adoption and the controversy that surrounds it. The chapter will continue with discussions on cultural socialization and feelings by the adopted child toward their own race. Information on commitment levels by the parents to the child's biological culture will also be addressed. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the implications for school counselors.

### **History of Transracial Adoption**

Transracial adoption became a trend in the 1950's, when a large number of foreign-born refugee children needed homes after World War II and the Korean War (Carter-Black, 2002). The question of whether or not white parents should be allowed to adopt children of other races has long been the cause of controversy. The discussion began with a position paper drafted by the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) in 1972. The authors of the paper argued that adoption of black children by white parents was a form of "cultural genocide." The NABSW questioned how a child is supposed to form an ethnic identity when surrounded by people of a different race. The NABSW argued that transracial adoptees will feel inferior or will not be comfortable with their own biological culture as they grow older. The release of the paper by NABSW set the tone for the argument surrounding transracial adoption.

Since 1940, race has been treated by the U.S. Supreme Court as a "suspect classification" under the Equal Protection clause of the federal Constitution (Simon & Altstein, 2000). Because of this, the subject of race in an official decision is subject to strict judicial scrutiny. However, some courts have attempted to use race to justify an adoption decision. For example, in one District of Columbia Circuit court decision from 1955, the court denied a Black father's right to

adopt his white stepchild based solely on his race. The court declared that as the boy grew up, he might lose the valuable social status associated with being white because people could associate him with his Black father.

The development of transracial adoption many years ago was not a deliberate act. Social changes regarding abortion, birth control, single parenthood, and reproduction in general have reduced the number of white children available for parents to adopt (Simon & Altstein, 2000). There has also been an increase in the number of white parents willing to adopt children who are a different race than them. Although transracial adoption has become more accepted throughout the years, a large number of people still oppose the idea due to racial and cultural ideals. Most specifically in regards to black children, opponents of transracial adoption believe that it is the adoption agencies that make conscious efforts not to involve the black community (Simon & Altstein, 2000).

### **Cultural Socialization**

Cultural socialization is the process of learning about a certain culture and how to live within that culture. As Lee (2003) stated, cultural socialization is “the transmission of cultural values, beliefs, customs, and behaviors from parents, family, friends, and community to children that foster racial and ethnic identity development, equip children with coping strategies to deal with racism and discrimination, and encourage pro-social behavior and appropriate participation in society” (p. 720).

Cultural socialization is not the same for transracial adoptees as it is for same-race or same-ethnicity families. According to Lee et al. (2006), cultural socialization refers to the manner by which adoptive parents address ethnic and racial issues within the family and in the

case of transracial adoptive families, cultural socialization refers to the transmission of the child's and not the parents' birth culture.

Transracial adoptees are typically adopted into very well-educated, married, Caucasian families (Kahan, 2006; Rojewski, 2005; Trolley, Wallin, & Hansen, 1995). For these parents, raising their adopted child, whose birth culture is usually very different from their own, requires a lot of effort on their part. Adoptive parents are tasked with socializing their new child into the family's culture and into the American culture while at the same time respecting the child's birth culture. It can be a very difficult process for all the family members involved but parents need to make a clear and explicit effort at cultural socialization (Lee, et al., 2006).

Cultural socialization by adoptive parents is practiced at varying degrees. According to Scroggs and Heitfield (2001), some parents may not want their adopted child to learn the values and beliefs of the biological culture. Instead, these parents choose to raise their adopted children in strictly the American culture. Scroggs and Heitfield (2001) identified two very important factors that arise when discussing cultural socialization of transracial adoptees: the parents' attitudes toward race and their belief in how important cultural socialization truly is.

Additionally, McRoy and Zurcher (1983) discovered that white adoptive parents of black children who were "colorblind" were less likely to live in racially integrated neighborhoods and interact with races outside of their own. These parents were also less likely to make an effort at teaching their adopted child about what it means to grow up as a black person in the United States. In a similar study done by DeBerry, Scarr, and Weinberg (1996), the authors found that parents who had adopted black children and were unsure of cultural socialization tended to ignore the issue of race. To support these findings, Lee et al. (2006), stated the parents of

transracial adoptees who either deny or are unaware of the effects race has on a person's identity and sense of self are less likely to believe in the value and importance of cultural socialization.

### **Feelings Toward Biological Culture**

In a study done by Simon and Altstein (1992), the authors discovered that transracial adoptees tended to have a stronger sense of ethnicity than that of their non-adopted peers and children who were adopted by parents of the same race as them. Although the study concluded that transracial adoptees are proud of their biological culture, the same thing cannot be said for their feelings regarding race. According to Westhues and Cohen (1994), many transracial adoptees are uncertain about their race. Reasons for their adoption may be questioned by the adoptee, but concerns about their race are a primary issue (Benson, Sharma, & Roehlkepartain, 1994).

It is not clear how important it is for transracial adoptees to identify with their biological cultures; however, numerous adoption studies have indicated that transracial adoptees feelings toward their biological culture are directly related to family attitudes and to the child's exposure to that culture (Andujo, 1988; Benson et al., 1994; Feigelman & Silverman, 1983). Research suggests that ethnic identification seems to be important for some transracial adoptees but not for others (Textor, 1991). Although the importance of a transracial adoptee identifying with his or her biological culture is unknown, Friedlander (1999) believes "the child's cognitive understanding of being adopted, being an immigrant, and being an ethnic minority develop simultaneously, and the feelings that are aroused as this awareness unfolds can be overwhelming" (p. 44).

Taylor and Thorton (1996) believe indicators exist which suggest some transracial adoptees have negative racial experiences toward their biological culture. For example, in one

study, the authors found a relatively large portion of transracially adopted children (20%) indicated they wished they had a different racial status (Benson, Sharma, & Roehlkepartain, 1994). In a study done by McRoy et al. (1982), the authors found that many transracial adoptees' perceptions of their race and biological culture mirrored the perceptions of their adoptive parents. If the parents tended to minimize their adopted child's racial identity, the child did the same. Transracial adoptees raised by parents who deemphasized race indicated that race was not important to them. On the other hand, adoptees who acknowledged racial differences between themselves and their adoptive parents were generally children who had been raised by parents who discussed this issue with them openly. These adoptees were also found to feel more positively about their own biological race. In the same study (McRoy et al., 1982), the researchers discovered that some transracially adopted black children who had little to no contact with other black children characterized black people in the following ways: "blacks are poor," "they use bad English," etc. This finding suggested that transracial adoptees that are not around individuals of their own race may form racial stereotypes and/or faulty assumptions.

### **Commitment to Adoptee's Biological Culture**

A study done by Lee and Quintana (2005) investigated the benefits of cultural exposure for transracially adopted Korean children's development. The purpose of this study was to examine some of the benefits of cultural exposure for transracial adoptees. The results of the study found a positive relationship between cultural socialization and self-esteem. This was mediated by a feeling of belongingness, which was one aspect of ethnic identification among Asian-born international adoptees.

Because transracial adoptees are being raised by parents who are a different race, they tend to experience different racial socialization than children who are raised by their biological

parents or parents of the same race. Across several studies, two thirds or more of transracial adoptees fail to identify with their racial status (Andujo, 1988; Feigelman & Silverman, 1984; Kim, 1995). Miville, Koonce, Darlington, and Whitlock (2000) argued that “how an individual identifies as a racial or cultural being, particularly if he or she has to work at feeling positively about their racial or cultural characteristics, may significantly influence how he or she identifies as a unique individual” (p. 208). Ku (2005) stated that children who grow up in transracial families require special guidance in their ethnic and cultural development. Additionally, the North American Council on Adoptable Children stated that parents of transracial adoptees must realize that the ethnic and cultural heritage of the child is an essential right; therefore, the families must be willing to seek out services and personal contacts in the community that will support the child's ethnicity (McRoy & Zurcher, 1983).

Recently, Vonk (2001) created a definition of the cultural competence necessary for parents of transracial adoptees: 1) racial awareness (i.e., sensitivity to racism and discrimination), 2) multicultural planning (i.e., development of opportunities for the child to learn about and participate in his or her culture of birth), and 3) survival skills (i.e., the ability of parents to prepare their children to cope with racism). Lee (2003) stated that this socialization process can pose a challenge for many adoptive families because parents do not usually have very much knowledge of the child's birth culture leading up to the adoption and throughout the child's identity development. Many adoptive parents also unconsciously expose their transracial adoptee to only the culture the parents are familiar with. Additionally, research has shown that transracial adoptees begin to become aware of racial differences, as well as their adoptive status, as early as 4 to 5 years of age (Brodzinsky, Singer, & Braff, 1984; Huh & Reid, 2000). Parents of transracial adoptees are less likely to have firsthand knowledge and experience of how to



teach the child about life as a racial and ethnic minority in society (Lee, 2003). Given these differences, traditional views of cultural socialization have been modified to take into account the unique racial and ethnic dynamics within transracial adoptive families (Lee, 2003).

Those for and against transracial adoption recommend that parents of transracial adoptees learn the necessary skills to help support their children as they develop racial identities (Rushton & Minnis, 1997). Adoptive parents need to understand their own attitudes and opinions about their child's biological culture and be conscious of the roles they have in teaching their adopted child about his or her biological culture throughout their development (Lee, et al., 2006).

### **Implications for School Counselors**

School counseling can provide a safe environment and a very good opportunity for transracial adoptees to discuss certain issues they may have surrounding adoption. Before working with transracial adoptees and/or their families, school counselors need to have a strong understanding of their own viewpoints regarding race and identity. Bradley and Hawkins-Leon (2002) believe the counselors who work the most effectively with individuals in regards to race and culture are those who have a firm grasp of their own backgrounds and how their personal beliefs may affect the racial and cultural identities of their clients. School counselors should be prepared to address things such as multiculturalism, racism, and identity issues if and when students come to them for guidance.

According to Kaplan (1989), seven core issues are shared by many adoptees: loss, rejection, guilt/shame, grief, identity, intimacy, and control. According to Zirkle, Peterson, and Collins-Marotte (2001), academic success is greatly diminished for adopted students who are suffering from some or all of these issues. In a survey done by Rosenthal, Groze, and Morgan (1996), the researchers discovered that school-related resources were found to be very helpful for

parents of adopted students. School counselors can use the seven core issues as a framework for promoting a more positive educational experience for transracial adoptees.

School counselors can work on dealing with adoption issues in a variety of different ways. Suggested interactions are counselor-teacher consultation, counselor-conducted groups, individual counseling, and school coordinated programs (Zirkle, Peterson, & Collins-Marotte, 2001). Although there are numerous different ways school counselors can work with transracial adoptees, individual counseling is seen as the most effective method for dealing with some of the core issues. Individual counseling allows the school counselor to be available in a familiar setting for the student, and regular interaction between the school counselor and the student may foster some level of trust (Hayes, 1997; Parker & Forrest, 1993). If the student begins to see that the school counselor is genuinely concerned for their wellbeing, it may help to diminish some of the negative feelings they have as a result of their adoption.

While transracial adoption has been occurring since the 1950's and continues to grow, questions persist as to whether white parents should be allowed to adopt non-white children due to identity issues transracial adoptees may have later in their lives. Cultural socialization for a transracial family is very different than for a same-race family. In regards to transracial adoption, cultural socialization refers to the manner by which adoptive parents address ethnic and racial issues within the family (Lee, et al., 2006). Many transracial adoptees are uncertain about their race (Westhues & Cohen, 1994) and it is still unclear how important it is for transracial adoptees to identify with their biological cultures. The amount of exposure a transracial adoptee has to his or her biological culture is related to how committed parents are to teaching about it. This can be a very difficult process for parents because most are unfamiliar with their adopted child's biological culture (Lee, 2003). The school can be a valuable resource

for transracial adoptees. School counselors are helpful for students who wish to discuss their feelings they may have as a result of being a transracial adoptee.

### **Chapter III: Methodology**

This chapter will include the research design, a description of the sample, the instruments used, and the data collection procedures. In addition, the data analyses used will be reported. The chapter will conclude with the identified methodological limitations.

#### **Research Design**

This study was a qualitative, phenomenological study. It explored the experiences of transracial adoptees. Participant responses were gathered through a semi-structured interview format. A set of open-ended questions were asked of all participants, with follow-up questions being used to gather additional information. The interviews were analyzed to identify recurrent themes by participants.

#### **Sample Selection**

The sample for this research study consisted of six transracial adoptees. Of the sample, all six were personal contacts. Consent forms were used to ensure voluntary participation and confidentiality. In the case of minors, parental consent was obtained. A copy of the consent form is located in Appendix A. The Institutional Review Board of the University of Wisconsin-Stout approved the project before any research was completed.

#### **Instrumentation**

The purpose of this research was to understand the experiences of a specific population of transracial adoptees. Participants were asked do individual interviews with the researcher.

The research methods used had both face validity and content validity. Face validity refers to the interview questions having a logical connection to the concepts and research questions. Because the concepts and research questions addressed in the interviews were literature and theory inspired, the questions were logically connected to transracial adoption. A copy of the questions asked during the interviews is located in Appendix B.

**Data Collection**

Participants received a consent form which included: a description of the study, risks and benefits, time commitment, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and contact information of the research team and the supervisor. After signing the consent form, the participants sat down individually with the researcher to discuss their thoughts and feelings on transracial adoption.

A series of open-ended questions were asked of the participants. Follow-up questions were asked based on respondents' answers. Interviews were scheduled for 30 minutes and were conducted in person with each participant. Interviews were recorded and then later transcribed.

**Data analysis**

Results of the interviews were grouped according to main concepts and themes by the researcher. Each main interview question was considered a main concept. The main concepts were analyzed following an iterative process to show any commonalities or discrepancies. Themes were grouped as general (all respondents), typical (half or more of the respondents) and variant (fewer than half of the respondents) themes.

**Limitations**

Because of the number of available participants, the collected data were not derived from a randomized sample reflecting a larger population. Another limitation of this study was that all of the participants were personal contacts; therefore, sample bias may be possible. Additionally, the researcher's status as a transracial adoptee, along with the fact that the researcher was also both the interviewer and the sole data analyzer, limits the findings. Each of these limitations is typical in phenomenological research, which is intended to generate preliminary rather than generalizable findings.

## Chapter IV: Results

This chapter will include the results of the study. Demographic information and qualitative analysis of interviews will be discussed. The chapter will conclude with the research questions under investigation and a summary of the participants' answers.

### Demographic Information

Nine transracial adoptees were initially contacted by email and asked to participate in the study. Of those nine, six agreed to sit down for individual interviews. All participants were from western Wisconsin or eastern Minnesota. Of the six participants, five were female and one was male. One participant was under the age of 18 while the rest were between the ages of 22 and 26.

### Qualitative Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and then reviewed for common topical areas. Within each topic area, commonalities were grouped by theme. The findings are reported as general themes (all respondents indicating theme), typical themes (half or more of the respondents indicating theme) or variant themes (fewer than half of the respondents indicating theme).

**Main Concept One: Teaching of birth culture by adoptive parents.** This concept was explored through Question 1 (Being a different race than your parents, talk about how you learned about your biological culture.) along with Question 1.a (What is important to know about your biological culture?) and Question 1.b (How should adoptive parents help their transracial adoptee learn about his or her biological culture?).

Two typical themes emerged. Half of the participants ( $n = 3$ ) stated their adoptive parents did little to nothing in regards to teaching the adoptee about their biological culture. The other half stated their adoptive parents offered moderate information about the child's biological

culture through things such as culture camps and personal research. Additionally, half of the participants ( $n = 3$ ) did look for information about their biological culture on their own, and two respondents stated they did not ask or have any desire to learn about their biological culture.

For Question 1.a, half of the participants ( $n = 3$ ) stated they did not care or ever even think about what is important to know about their biological culture. The response from Participant 2 was, “I don’t think there’s really anything important to know. In general, it’s important to know about a lot of different cultures. There’s nothing specific about Korea I want to know, though.” Two of participants were interested in several aspects of their biological cultures but were unsure of how they would use or apply any of that information in their lives today. One participant believed it was important to know specific things about her biological culture such as how they live day to day.

A general theme in regards to Question 1.b was that adoptive parents should not push any information about an adopted child’s biological culture onto the adoptee. Participant 1 stated, “If I had [adopted] kids, I would give them books and stuff. I wouldn’t pressure them into looking into their culture.” If the adopted child wishes to learn more about his or her biological culture, all participants believe parents should provide and encourage information. Ideas such as visiting the birth country, meeting birth parents, going to culture camps, and providing resources to the child were all mentioned.

**Main Concept Two: Feelings surrounding biological culture.** This concept was explored through Question 2 (What are your feelings toward your biological culture?) and Question 2.a (How were these feelings shaped by being a transracial adoptee?)

Two variant themes were discovered for Question 2. The variant themes ( $n = 2$ ) for Question 2 were that participants either had no interest in their biological cultures or did not feel

they related to it at all. One participant was interested in learning about specific details of the culture such as lifestyle, foods, etc. while one other participant has noticed she is coming to respect her biological culture more as time goes on.

For Question 2.a, a general theme for all participants was they really do not have much of an opinion of their biological cultures because they have no memory of living anywhere but the United States. Participant 6 stated her feelings of her biological culture are shaped by being predominantly raised in the American culture: “The feelings I have about my birth culture are completely shaped by being a transracial adoptee because I was raised, and have lived my entire life, in America.” Another participant believed her feelings toward her biological culture have more to do with her own personality than it does with how her adoptive parents raised her.

**Main Concept Three: Commitment levels by adoptive parents to child’s biological culture.** This concept was explored in Question 3 (Growing up as a transracial adoptee, what type of commitment should adoptive parents have toward their child’s biological culture?).

A typical response ( $n = 3$ ) for Question 3 was that adoptive parents should offer information about their child’s biological culture if the child shows an interest in learning about it. Participants stated that it is important not to push any information on the child or force them to learn things if they show a clear lack of interest.

Two very different, singular opinions were also found in Question 3. Participant 3 believed that commitment by adoptive parents to the child’s biological culture is very important. She believed parents should gather as much information and resources as possible. Parents need to acknowledge the biological culture and ensure the child knows the door is always open if the child wishes to talk or learn about it. She stated, “...the parents need to be supportive. Don’t ignore it. That’s part of adopting. They [parents] shouldn’t think they don’t have to



acknowledge it because certain kids do have issues. They wonder why they're not the same."

However, a second ( $n = 1$ ) opinion was expressed by Participant 2. He believed that the child's biological culture is not important whatsoever. He stated that it all depends on the child and parents but in his case, he views himself as an American and has never had a desire to learn about his biological culture.

**Main Concept Four: Implications for school counselors.** This concept was addressed in Question 4 (Thinking back on your own experiences, can you share a few things you wish your school counselor would have known about being a transracial adoptee?)

Two variant themes were discovered in participants' answers. The first variant theme ( $n = 2$ ) shared by participants was that school counselors should make themselves more available to transracial adoptees and let the students know the counselor is there if the students ever need to talk about something. Participant 3 recalled times when she felt as if she didn't fit in and had no one to talk to: "I would never change my life but there's definitely a lot of confusion. A LOT. I never had a counselor address that. I understand that it wasn't very common but just having resources and even just talking about it and acknowledging it...it would have been nice to have someone to talk to."

The second variant theme ( $n = 2$ ) found in Question 4 was that participants believed school counselors could be very beneficial to not only transracial adoptees but their white peers, as well. Participant 1 stated, "I think that a counselor not so much has to talk to the adopted child but to the rest of the children and broaden their horizons. Keep them open-minded." Participant 6 believes the counselor must be culturally competent and be willing to acknowledge issues such as racism between students. She also thinks school counselors should offer adopted

students' resources and welcome the students who wish to come in and speak to them about issues surrounding their adoptions.

### **Summary**

In general, the six transracial adoptees who participated in this study shared many of the same responses to the four interview questions asked; however, there were also questions which received very different answers. All participants believed it is important for adoptive parents to avoid pushing the adopted child's biological culture on them. Half of the participants could not recall their adoptive parents providing any information about the child's biological culture while the other half stated being given moderate resources. In the opinion of three of the participants, parental commitment to the child's biological culture should depend on the child and how much he or she inquires about it. The majority of the participants also believed school counselors could be very beneficial to adopted students. Educators should be well informed and make themselves available to all students who wish to discuss adoption issues.

## Chapter V: Discussion

This chapter will include a summary of the study and research questions asked. Limitations will also be discussed. Conclusions will be made by comparing the results of the study to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. The chapter will conclude with recommendations for researchers, parents, and school counselors.

### Summary

Since the 1950's, more parents have looked outside their own race when considering children to adopt. Because of obvious physical differences, transracial adoption has been the cause of much controversy. Over the years, questions have arisen as to whether or not transracial adoptees are being raised in the correct environment when it comes to developing their racial and cultural identities.

This research study looked to identify the attitudes and perceptions of transracial adoptees' in regards to racial and cultural identity. The study attempted to answer several important questions:

1. What is the importance of cultural socialization to transracial adoptees?
2. What feelings do transracial adoptees express toward their biological culture as a result of being raised by white parents?
3. What should the level of commitment by the adoptive parents be to the child's biological culture?
4. What types of challenges do transracial adoptee bring to school counselors?

The research study found a number of similarities and some differences between the participants' responses and the literature review. The results of the study found that half the participants received little to no exposure to their biological culture as children while the other

half of participants received moderate exposure. All participants believed it is important for adoptive parents to avoid pushing the adopted child's biological culture on them. The majority of the participants also believed school counselors could be very beneficial to adopted students. These findings will be discussed in more detail in the conclusions section.

### **Limitations**

Limitations of this study included the small sample size as only six transracial adoptees were interviewed. All participants were also located in the Midwest areas of western Wisconsin and eastern Minnesota. If the results of this study were to be applied outside of the local area, the study would need to be further expanded to include a broader geographical area and larger population. The study is further limited in that all participants were personal contacts of the researcher. A final limitation of the study is that of possible researcher bias due to the fact the researcher herself is a transracial adoptee. The researcher was also both the interviewer and the sole data analyzer.

### **Conclusions**

**Research Question 1.** Research Question 1 asked by being a different race than your parents, how did you learn about your biological culture? When researching cultural socialization, a review of the literature found that adoptive parents have the unusual responsibility of not only teaching their transracial adoptee about their adoptive culture but teaching them about their biological culture, as well (Lee, et al., 2006).

In contrast to this literature, only half of the participants' parents offered any sort of information about their child's biological culture; these parents utilized resources such as culture camps to expose their child to his or her biological culture. However, because many of the participants reported they felt no desire to learn about their biological culture in the first place,

the lack of information given by these parents was not perceived by participants as a particularly negative factor.

All the transracial adoptees participating in this study believed adoptive parents should not attempt to push any information about their adopted child's biological culture onto the adoptee. Participants suggested ways to incorporate biological culture into an adoptee's life but only if the adoptee expresses an interest in learning about it.

**Research Question 2.** Research Question 2 asked what feelings transracial adoptees express toward their biological culture as a result of being raised by white parents. The literature surrounding transracial adoptees' views of their biological cultures stated many adoptees have more questions about their race than about the reasons why they were adopted (Benson, Sharma, & Roehlkepartain, 1994).

All the participants in this study reported not having formed much of an opinion about their biological cultures because the only culture they feel any connection to is the one they were raised in by their white parents. This supports the study done by McRoy et al. (1982) which found that if the parents tended to minimize their adopted child's racial identity, the child did the same.

Research has also suggested that a transracial adoptee's biological culture is more important to some adoptees than others (Textor, 1991). The findings in the study would support this statement as some participants reported having no interest in their biological culture while another participant wanted to learn more things about hers.

**Research Question 3.** Research Question 3 asked what the level of commitment by the adoptive parents should be to the child's biological culture. The literature emphasized how the majority of adoptive parents only expose their child to the culture the parents are familiar with

(Lee, 2003). This can become problematic when issues such as racism and prejudice present themselves. Research has found that parents must make more conscious efforts at learning about the child's biological culture in order for them to better address specific issues with their child (Lee, et al., 2006). The literature also stated the importance of parents to seek out services for their adoptee in order for the child to learn more about his or her biological culture (McRoy & Zurcher, 1983).

Although only one participant in this study thought parent commitment levels were extremely vital, many of the participants agreed with the literature and believed parents should provide information and other resources about their child's biological culture to them, but only if the child begins showing an interest in learning about it. Much like Question 1, participants reiterated the fact parents should be careful not to push the child into learning about his or her biological culture if the adoptee does not want to.

**Research Question 4.** Research Question 4 asked what types of challenges transracial adoptees present to school counselors. A review of the literature regarding the significance of school counselors and other school personnel to transracially adopted students found that school-related resources are very helpful for both parents and students (Rosenthal et al., 1996). Research stressed the essential need for school counselors to be aware of their own racial and cultural backgrounds and how their personal backgrounds affect the racial and cultural identities of their students (Bradley & Hawkins-Leon, 2002).

Participants in this study agreed the availability of a school counselor to transracial adoptees was very important. The participants emphasized that school counselors should make a point to let students know the counselor is available if the student ever needs to discuss certain issues during school.

Something a few participants addressed that was not found in the literature was the fact that not only do school counselors and other school personnel need to be aware of a transracially adopted student's feelings surrounding certain issues with race and culture, but they also need to pay attention to the feelings and actions of these students' white peers. Counselors need to be culturally competent and be able to address multicultural issues with all students, not with just solely the adopted students.

### **Recommendations for Researchers and School Counselors**

Many recommendations can be made using the results of this study and the literature base itself. Additional studies involving a broader geographical area and larger population should also be completed. It is recommended researchers continue to conduct studies regarding identity development of transracial adoptees. Much of the present, available literature is outdated and new studies may find different results or could help support older studies.

Parents of transracial adoptees should continue making every effort to become more educated about their adoptee's biological culture. Although not all adoptees may express an interest in learning about their biological culture, it is better for parents to have the information and resources readily available than be unprepared if and when their child inquires.

Based on results of this study, transracially adopted students could benefit from increased communication with their school counselors. Additional education in multiculturalism by school counselors is recommended to improve this collaboration. It is believed by the research participants that if school counselors made themselves more available to adopted students, these students would feel as if they had someone they could talk to if and when certain issues arose. As suggested earlier, individual and small group counseling sessions are viable options to increase communication between school counselors and students.

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## Appendix A: Signed Consent

**This research has been approved by the UW-Stout IRB as required by the Code of Federal Regulations Title 45 Part 46.**

### Consent to Participate In UW-Stout Approved Research

**Title:** Perceptions of Racial and Cultural Development in Young Adult Transracial Adoptees

**Investigator:** Dena Moore

[moorede@my.uwstout.edu](mailto:moorede@my.uwstout.edu)

**Research Sponsor:** Barbara Flom, Ph.D.

[flomb@uwstout.edu](mailto:flomb@uwstout.edu)

**Description:**

The purpose of this study is to identify the numerous challenges transracial adoptees go through during their identity development as children and adolescents. You will be asked about the experiences you have had as a transracial adoptee. Our interview will be recorded and combined with information from other transracial adoptees. All recordings will be destroyed after group results are determined.

**Risks and Benefits:**

The risks of taking part in the study are minimal, but participants may experience some discomfort in recalling past events and/or challenges while responding to the interview questions. The participant can withdraw from taking the survey at any time. Participants will also be able to skip any questions they do not wish to answer. If participants wish to further discuss any issues that arise from taking part in the study, I will refer them to local resources by providing specific contact information. For participants in Wisconsin, Lutheran Social Services provides post-adoption services. Participants looking for more information can visit their website at "<http://www.lsswis.org/Services/Counseling>." For participants in Minnesota, Children's Home Society has a post-adoption helpline. Participants can call 800.952.9302 ext. 2320 to speak with someone about issues surrounding adoption. I will assist with contact of referral agency if requested.

The main benefit of participating in this study is that you will be contributing information to others who are interested in learning more about the challenges transracial adoptees face.

**Special Populations:**

If you choose to participate and are between the ages of 16-18 years old, your parent or guardian must also sign the consent form.

**Time Commitment:**

Each individual interview should last no longer than one hour.

**Confidentiality:**

Each interview will be given a number only; names will not be included on any of the documents that contain your responses to the interview questions. The taped recordings of the interviews will be in my possession only. When the study has been completed, all interview documents and recordings will be destroyed. This informed consent will not be kept with any of the other documents completed with this project.

**Right to Withdraw:**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to participate without any adverse consequences to you. Should you choose to participate and later wish to withdraw from the study, you may discontinue your participation at this time without incurring adverse consequences.

**IRB Approval:**

This study has been reviewed and approved by The University of Wisconsin-Stout's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB has determined that this study meets the ethical obligations required by federal law and University policies. If you have questions or concerns regarding this study please contact the Investigator or Advisor. If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a research subject, please contact the IRB Administrator.

**Investigator:** Dena Moore  
715-864-9282  
moorede@my.uwstout.edu

**Advisor:** Barbara Flom, Ph.D.  
715-232-1343  
flomb@uwstout.edu

**IRB Administrator**  
Sue Foxwell, Director, Research Services  
152 Vocational Rehabilitation Bldg.  
UW-Stout  
Menomonie, WI 54751  
715-232-2477  
foxwells@uwstout.edu

**Statement of Consent:**

By signing this consent form you agree to participate in the project entitled, *Perceptions of Racial and Cultural Development in Young Adult Transracial Adoptees*.

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Signature

Date

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Signature of parent or guardian  
(If minors are involved)

Date

### **Appendix B: Interview Questions**

1. Being a different race than your parents, talk about how you learned about your birth culture.
  - a. What is important to know about your birth culture?
  - b. How should adoptive parents help their transracially adopted child learn about their birth culture?
2. What are your feelings toward your biological culture?
  - a. How were these feelings shaped by being a transracial adoptee?
3. Growing up as a transracial adoptee, what type of commitment should adoptive parents have toward their child's biological culture?
  - a. Talk about your own experiences with this.
4. Thinking back on your own experiences, can you share a few things you wish your school counselor would have known about being a transracially adopted child.