

Counseling Adult Black Transracial Adoptees

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Abstract

The adoption of children by parents of a different race has grown significantly in the United States with about 21% of transracial adoptees being Black children. A considerable amount of research has focused on the experiences of adoptive parents while the unique therapeutic needs of adult Black transracial adoptees continue to remain under-explored. This practice brief explores the topic of Black transracial adoption, assessment tools such as the cultural racial identity model and the adoptive family life cycle, as well as counseling interventions that are tailored for this population. Significant issues include psychological adjustment, identity development and the impact of racial socialization within adoptive families.

Keywords

transracial adoption, identity development, adoptee mental health, adoption

Transracial adoption is defined as the adoption of a child by parents who are of a different race (Javier, 2007). This kind of adoption has gained much attention in the United States over the years and is known to be a growing trend based on statistics from the United States Department of State (2020) which shows that transracial adoption rates were remarkably higher than same-race adoptions. For instance, a 58% increase in the former and 24% increase in the latter over the last decade. In addition, over the last decade, about a quarter million children were brought into the United States from overseas (Raleigh, 2016). Moreover, 85% of international adoptions are transracial (Park-Taylor & Wing, 2020). As transracial adoptees enter adulthood though their unique counseling needs remain, the kinds of therapeutic supports adapt to meet the adult developmental stages. This practice brief reviews the prevalence of Black transracial adoption in the United States, assessment strategies, and interventions suitable to support adult Black transracial adoptees and their families in the therapeutic setting.

Prevalence

A report by Kalisher et al. (2020) posited that between 2017 and 2019, transracial adoption made up 28% of all adoptions, with 90% of those adoptees identifying as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. Of the transracial adoptees during this period, 21% were Black (Kalisher et al., 2020). At the same time, a 45% decline in international adoptions in 2020 was likely due to the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic according to the US Department of State (2020). Raleigh's 2016 study highlighted adoptive parents' focus on the adopted children's ethnicity over their race and how racial groups such as Hispanic and Asian children are adopted more frequently than their Black counterparts, while interest in White children remained high. Furthermore, 17.71% of adoptees seek

counseling services compared to 8.67% of non-adoptees (Baden & Wiley, 2007).

Identification and Assessment Strategies

The period of emerging adulthood (late adolescence and early adulthood) for transracial adoptees tends to be more complicated for transracial adoptees (Alvarado et al., 2014). Much of these complications lie in their adjustment, identity formation, and sometimes the search for their own roots (Baden & Wiley, 2007). In addition to trying to negotiate their sense of selves by attempting to bridge the sense of self from their biological families and adoptive families, transracial adoptees are also faced with racial and ethnic identities that vastly differ from adoptive families (Baden et al., 2012). For counselors working with adult Black Transracial Adoptees, they may find that clients do not show up in waiting rooms or on screens endorsing a clear identity crisis. They may present with feeling of anxiety, not feeling like they belong, lack of self-esteem or struggle with connection (Alvarado et al., 2014). However, these are factors that are crucial to their ethnic identity and impact their general wellness and place within their cultural group (Montgomery & Jordan, 2018). There are some major categories that adoptees' presenting issues possibly fall into according to Baden and Wiley (2007):

1. Identity Development: "Who am I?"

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2. Search and Reunion: "Who did I come from, and do they think about me?"
3. Psychological Adjustment: "Where do I fit in all of this?"

Beyond the intake where the client's initial information about their presenting issues is assessed, questions about background and family could bring up their status as an adoptee, giving the counselor insight about the direction treatment could go in, as well as which of the above categories the client's presenting concerns may fall. In assessing the client's presenting concerns there are two assessment tools that counselors can utilize to get a clear picture of what their clients are facing: The adoptive family life cycle (AFLC) and cultural racial identity model (CRIM).

The Adoptive Family Life Cycle

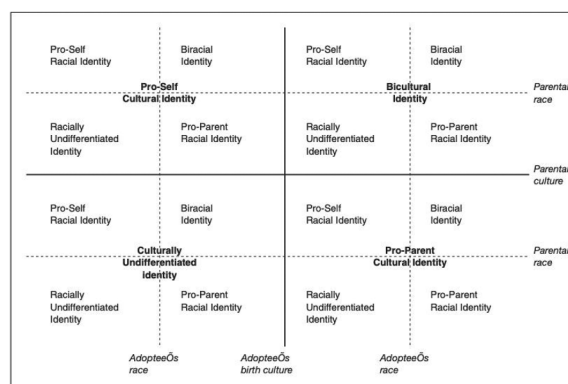
While many families go through the developmental stages of a family life cycle, families with adopted children have added layers that make the different stages far from straightforward. Some of these added layers include having conversations about the reasons for adoption, adjusting to societal stigma around adoption, addressing topics about racial differences between the adoptive parents and the adopted child and the pull towards the child's curiosity about birth parents. The ability of the parents and child to navigate these developmental tasks play a significant role in adjustment within the family system (Brodinsky & Brodinsky, 1998). This is where the AFLC can be used to normalize a lot of the experiences the client and their family may be having (Alvarado et al., 2014). According to Brodinsky and Brodinsky (1998), the AFLC consists of the following:

- Pre-adoption stage: This is the stage where parents who are dealing with conditions such as infertility may be coping with the decision to adopt. The stage sometimes includes an examination of their emotions about stereotypes and in this case, stereotypes about transracial or international adoption choices.
- Infancy: In this stage, the parents begin to embrace their identity as Adoptive Parents and begin the attachment process with their newborn/baby. There are thoughts that may be coming up about the child's origin such as their home country, culture, and race. For the adopted child, this is a time of adjustment and attempt to bond with the new parents.
- Toddlerhood and Preschool: This is the stage that parents find themselves being able to start discussions with their children, with some parents beginning the conversation between 2 and 4 years of age. For the child, they may have some questions at this stage as they are introduced to the reality of being a part of two different families. Some children at this stage can identify themselves as adopted although developmentally will not have the ability to understand the intricacies of the term.

- Middle Childhood: During this stage, parents may find themselves helping their children with coping with the loss of their identity within their birth family (circumstances around them being relinquished by birth parents). Some may begin discussions about race as their children begin to face questions from their community about the differences between them and their adoptive family. For many Black children in this phase, they may begin to have experiences around racism and microaggressions at school which lead to complex conversations at home that parents may or may not be prepared for.
- Adolescence: The grief surrounding the loss that comes with adoption continues into the teen years and adoptive parents are tasked with supporting their adolescents as they process this, in addition to attempting to hold positive views about their birth families. For many adoptees, this is a time when the idea of searching for their birth families comes up and they begin to deal with the guilt of entertaining the idea.

As a psychoeducational tool, counselors can educate their clients about the different stages and explore what each stage looked like for them, pointing out similarities and differences they have from what other adoptees and their families experience. It can be a time to encourage clients to address some of the issues they faced during these developmental stages, to explore how they may play a role in some of the presenting issues in which they currently struggle.

Cultural Racial Identity Model



Baden and Steward (2007) proposed that children's development is not only dependent on their early childhood experiences but also in how parents address and manage racial or diversity-related topics as they come up in family, hence developing the CRIM. A study by Hrapczynski and Leslie (2018) on socialization around race within transracial adoptive families that have White parents showed that the parents were not preparing their Black children for the realities of racial bias outside the safety of their homes. This is one of many studies in adoption research that highlight the gaps in parent readiness

for the realities Black adopted children for example may face as they get older and become adults. These considerations for transracial adoptive families are to be prioritized as they play a large role in the formation of identity and ideas around ethnicity (Montgomery & Jordan, 2018).

CRIM as a framework normalizes the transracial adoptee's experiences within the family and provides them an opportunity to explore the identity against that of their adopted family (Alvarado et al., 2014). CRIM has two axes: Cultural identity axis and racial identity axis which lead to a number of other axes, resulting in a 16-axis model that counselors can use in exploring the needs of their Black transracial adult adoptee clients considering the reality that they do not have the same experiences as adoptees raised in same-race families (Baden & Steward, 2007). The purpose of this model is to have a better understanding of the complexities around culture and race as well as the roles they play in the transracial adoptee's experience (Zelege et al., 2018).

Adjunct Resources

Practitioners may use the following resources for outside of session activities or in session discussion with adult clients to help clarify how race and identity shaped their lives as Black transracial adoptees.

- NPR. (2018). Code switch: Transracial adoptees on their racial identity and sense of self. <https://www.npr.org/2018/10/13/657201204/code-switch-transracial-adoptees-on-their-racial-identity-and-sense-of-self>
- Washington Post. (2021). "I know my parents love me, but they don't love my people" <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/interactive/2021/transracial-adoption-racial-reckoning/>
- CCMV Center (2018). Understanding the Adoptive Family Life Cycle. <https://cssmv.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Understanding-the-Adoptive-Family-Life-Cycle.pdf>

Interventions

Emotionally Focused Therapy

Attachment is a topic that is commonly reviewed in adoption-related research (Alvarado et al., 2014) so it is reasonable to consider attachment-related interventions when working with adult Black transracial adoptees. One such strategy is Emotionally Focused Therapy, and its family-focused derivative, emotionally focused family therapy (Alvarado et al., 2014). Emotionally focused therapy centers on one's emotions and in this case would be focused on the transracial adoptee's emotions about themselves, adoption, and their adoptive family, as well as the meaning they create for themselves based on these emotions (Dankoski, 2001). The counselor would assist the client in naming the emotion, whether they are helpful or not and begin the work of attachment repair as necessary with the client.

Support Groups

Hearing other adult Black transracial adoptees share experiences about adoption can normalize the experiences clients may face. Numerous in person and virtual adoption support groups for different stages of life exist in adoptee communities. It is important that Black transracial adoptee clients are pointed in the direction of groups where the transracial experience is highlighted or the main focus so that clients can make meaningful connections based on experiences (Baden & Wiley, 2007).

Adjunct Resources

Largest Transracial Adoption Groups. (n.d.) Retrieved December 13, 2024, from <https://www.meetup.com/topics/transracial-adoption/>
 Pact Support Groups. (n.d.) Retrieved December 13, 2024 from https://pactadopt.org/support-groups/?et_fb=1&PageSpeed=off#find_your_people

Psychoeducation

The assessment tools mentioned above are suitable for sharing with clients to normalize their lived experiences and provide guidelines of what they can expect in the different stages of the AFLC for example. Counselors can engage clients using tools like books, for example, *In Their Own Voices* by Simon and Rhorda. Another avenue is television shows such as *This is Us* or podcasts like *The Adoptee Next Door*, by Tucker.

Implications for Individual, Couple, and Family Counselors

With the prevalence of mental health issues amongst adoptees and the concept being one of the least talked about in the mental health field, there is a need for competence in serving this population (Betts, 2003; Miller et al., 2000). Counselors are more likely to see adoptees and their families due to being more three times likely to seek counseling services (Randolph, 2014). The initial presenting concerns during intake may not explicitly point towards adoption dynamics and issues like identity and adjustment struggles. Counselors will need to take a step beyond the typical therapeutic cultural competence when working with Black transracial adoptees, and actively work to understand the complexities of racial identity development and how being raised in White families can impact their sense of self and belonging. Assessment tools such as The AFLC cannot be used without an overlay of racial and social experiences such as microaggressions Black adoptees may have experienced in the different developmental stages of life. Counselors will have to move conversations about identity development beyond solely adoptee identity and include racial identity models such as the CRIM to guide the conversations.

Studies such as Lee et al. (2022) study on adoptive parents and microaggressions discussed how much of the research has focused on adoptive parents and not as much on adoptees. As such, counselors may be exposed to more parent-focused literature, which may translate to how they conceptualize families

receiving services. Therefore, counselors will need to be cognizant of centering adoptee experiences in counseling sessions and providing more space for them to express themselves and their lived experiences.

Beyond the counseling space, counselors working with Black adult transracial adoptees will also need to stay abreast on current adoption-related issues and do their due diligence in helping advocate for policies that are socially just. Referring a Black adult transracial adoptee to a support group might seem sufficient but counselors may end up doing harm to their clients if they are not conscious of how racism and White supremacy can permeate into some of these spaces. However, in order to know exactly what to look for in these spaces and which policies to support, counselors will need to pursue ongoing continuing education and trainings focusing on working with adoptees.


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