

Is Transracial Adoption in the Best Interests  
of Ethnic Minority Children?:  
Questions Concerning Legal  
and Scientific Interpretations  
of a Child's Best Interests

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**ABSTRACT.** In the past two decades a growing body of empirical research has purported to demonstrate that transracial adoption does not negatively impact, and may positively benefit, children of color, particularly Black children. This manuscript critically examines the studies purporting to establish this conclusion. It is argued that several methodological difficulties exist in these studies. In addition, both legal and scientific assessments of children's well-being define adjustment and maladjustment according to Eurocentric norms that define individual well-being in isolation from the well-being of one's racial or ethnic group. It is suggested that further research is necessary, most notably research that takes an Africentric approach, in order to establish that transracial adop-

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tion serves the best interests of Black and other ethnic minority children. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.haworthpressinc.com>>]

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Debates over the legality of race-matching adoption policies center on the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment which, as judicially interpreted, disallows the use of racial classifications except insofar as strong public policy reasons can be given for their utilization (see, for example, *Brown v. Board of Education* 1954; *City of Richmond v. J.A. Croson Company* 1989; *Loving v. Virginia* 1967; *Palmore v. Sidoti* 1984; *Shaw v. Reno* 1993). Constitutional law thus places the burden of proof upon the opponents of transracial adoption to provide a justification for using racial criteria as a guide to adoptive placements. According to proponents of transracial adoption, such as Senator Howard Metzenbaum, sponsor of the 1994 and 1996 Multi-ethnic Placement Acts (U.S. Congress 1994; Department of Children and Family Services 1996), Harvard law professors Elizabeth Bartholet (1991) and Randall Kennedy (1995), the ACLU (Woodhouse 1995), and the Institute for Justice (Stanfield 1995), no such justification for race-matching policies exists. Thus adoption agencies that race match practice race discrimination in violation of the fourteenth amendment.

This line of legal reasoning ignores the ongoing efforts of the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) to argue that transracial adoption is a form of cultural genocide detrimental to Black children, as well as Black families and communities (NABSW 1972). According to NABSW, adoption of Black children by white couples may have potentially serious adverse effects on Black children's identity formation and their ability to cope with racism. These sentiments echo those raised by Native American leaders. Surveys conducted in 1969 and 1974 indicated that approximately one-third of Native American children had been removed from their native families—most for reasons other than child abuse—and placed in non-native (typically white) foster and adoptive homes or in institutions. Concern over this

assault on Native families and culture prompted the 1978 Indian Child Welfare Act—a federal law that protected tribal sovereignty in determining the ancestry of Native children and gave preference to extended family or tribe in placement of Native children (Inouye 1996; Rainey 1995; Weston 1995). More recently, Hispanic Americans and others, such as the Korean government, have echoed both Native American and Black American concerns regarding the transracial and transcultural adoption of ethnic minority children (see Andujo 1988; Bartholet 1991, p. 1181; p. 617; Simon and Alstein 1994, p. 94). It is in this context of multiple culture's concerns regarding the assimilation of their children into white families that we here explore research concerning the best interests of ethnic minority children. Indeed, many of the considerations raised below may apply to transracial adoption generally, insofar as most such adoptions involve the adoption of children of color by white couples. As it is NABSW's sustained criticism of transracial adoption that has generated the most controversy and research in the U.S., however, this paper will focus primarily on issues surrounding the adoption of Black children by whites.

In 1972, NABSW argued that Black children should be placed in Black homes in order that they may “receive the total sense of themselves and develop a sound projection of the future” (1972, p. 1049). NABSW further noted that

Humans develop their sense of values, identity, self concept, attitudes and basic perspective within the family group. Black children in white homes are cut off from the healthy development of themselves as Black people. . . . Only a Black family can transmit the emotional and sensitive subtleties of perception and reaction essential for a Black child's survival in a racist society. (NABSW, 1972, p. 1049)

Concern about whether white families can teach Black children the skills needed to effectively cope with the discrimination and prejudice that they will encounter has remained a central issue in the debate about transracial adoption. The family is a critical resource for ensuring that Black children learn the adaptive survival skills required to meet the demands of life in a racist society. According to Greene (1990):

A major task of parenting persons is that of interpreting the outside world's messages to a child about who she or he is with

respect to Black and white persons, and what his or her respective place in the world is or can be. This must be done in addition to teaching the child the skills required to survive and negotiate the cognitive, social, and for Black children, racial tasks of the world. (p. 214)

The skills needed to deal with these "racial tasks" are acquired through a process of racial socialization—a process of "communicat[ing] to Black children . . . what it means to be Black in America, what they may expect from Black and white persons, how to cope with it, and whether or not the disparaging messages of the broader culture are true" (Greene, 1990, p. 209).

Like other parents, Black parents need to nurture and teach their children to become competent and caring adults. In addition to "such routine socialization experiences and practices," parents of Black children need to be concerned about the development of a positive racial identity in their children (Taylor and Thornton, 1996, p. 284; see also Franklin and Boyd-Franklin, 1985). The job of racially socializing and rearing Black children to be healthy adults can be a significant challenge for Black parents. Nevertheless, Taylor and Thornton (1996) point out that we know little about how Black parents accomplish this task, and even less is known about how this is done by white parents of Black children. Those who oppose transracial adoption are concerned about how well equipped white parents are to effectively socialize Black children to have a "healthy sense of self." Their concerns become

. . . particularly urgent given that White parents, by virtue of their privileged racial status, may consciously or unconsciously reject a view of American culture as being racially stratified. Even given an awareness of these concerns, White parents may possess only a limited understanding of the dynamics and consequences of race in America. (Taylor and Thornton, 1996, p. 296)

Racial socialization is much more effective, according to Franklin and Franklin-Boyd (1985), when it occurs within a family environment where parents are aware of the child's need to be loved and supported in developing a healthy sense of self in a society that frequently devalues Black children. Denying, rejecting, or just being ignorant about the existence of racism and ways to socialize children

of color to deal with its consequences can have a devastating effect on the ability of Black children to develop a positive racial identity, self-acceptance and self-esteem.

In 1994, while acknowledging the efforts of some white parents to teach their children about Black culture, NABSW reaffirmed its belief that transracial adoption was not in a Black child's best interests. Quoting Grier and Cobb (1968), they argued that Black culture was best transmitted to children by Black families.

"Families who make efforts to learn a child's culture in an attempt to pass it on are to be commended for the effort." However, "culture cannot be bought or sold, secured from a book, nor learned from watching television, or attending a parenting class. Culture is best and most effectively taught by those who have lived the experience. Culture is second nature; when one is successfully imbued with one's culture, it is manifested as though it were a part of the genes." (NABSW, 1994, p. 9)

Other child welfare associations, such as the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC), likewise contend that the challenge of parenting ethnic minority children can be best met by promoting same race adoptions. "Placement of children with a family of like ethnic background is desirable because families are more likely to provide the special needs of minority children with the strengths that counter the ill effects of racism" (Grilles and Kroll, 1991).

This line of argument in favor of the constitutionality of race-matching adoption was accepted, in part, by the legislators who sponsored the 1994 Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA). The MEPA prohibited agencies receiving federal funds from delaying or denying the adoptive placement of children solely on the basis of racial considerations, but nonetheless permitted consideration of race as one of several factors used to determine a child's best interests (U.S. Congress, 1994). By 1996, however, the MEPA had been amended to make consideration of race in adoptive placements impermissible, unless such considerations could be documented as relevant to an individual child's particular needs (Department of Children and Family Services, 1996). NABSW's argument concerning what is, in general, best for ethnic minority children, was effectively blocked by legislation that prohibited case workers from making any general assumptions concerning "what a child of a particular racial or ethnic background may

need" and provided stiff penalties for violation of this prohibition (Department of Children and Family Services, 1996, p. 2).

Both the revised MEPA and the legal scholarship that supports its "non-discriminatory provisions" rely heavily on a growing social scientific literature devoted to showing that—contrary to NABSW's contention that Black children will fare better in Black families—the well-being of children of color is unaffected, and perhaps even positively affected, by transracial adoptive placements. The purpose of this article is to critically examine the studies purporting to establish this conclusion and to identify the need for an Africentric approach in future research on transracial adoption.

### **RESEARCH FINDINGS SUPPORTING TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION**

In an early study, published shortly after NABSW's (1972) position paper against transracial adoption, Grow and Shapiro (1974) examined the success rate of 125 transracial adoptions. Based on personality testing of the children and parental assessments of their children, they concluded that 77% of transracially adopted children had adjusted successfully to their adoption by white families (Grow and Shapiro, 1974).

In the 1980s, multivariate analyses were performed by researchers examining the success rates of transracial adoptions. These studies examined the relationship between disruptions in adoption and several variables: children's pre-adoptive histories; age of children at time of placement; whether the adoption was by a foster family; the degree of extended family opposition to the adoption; and the extent of race-matching in the adoption. Silverman and Feigelman (1981) examined questionnaires given to 97 white families who adopted African American children and 56 families who adopted white children. They found that African American children were more poorly adjusted than white children, but also that they were more likely to experience hostility preceding their adoption than white children and more likely to be older than white children at the time of adoption. To determine which of these variables were more salient, Silverman and Feigelman used a mail survey which elicited adopted parents' responses to questions concerning their children's adjustment, the age of the children when adopted and the stability of children's placements preceding the adoption.

Again, they found African American children "more maladjusted" than their white counterparts. However, on the basis of a 64% return rate (713 returned questionnaires of 1121 mailed), Silverman and Feigelman concluded that the child's age at adoption and the degree of family opposition to the adoption—not racial difference between parents and child—were the predictors of "maladjustment" among children.

Rosenthal et al.'s 1988 mail survey of 800 special needs families from Oklahoma, Kansas, and Illinois who had adopted transracially and inracially, likewise concluded that differences between the two groups of adopted children were attributable to factors related to children's pre-adoptive histories. On the basis of parental assessments of their relationship with their child(ren) and of the impact of adoption on the family, researchers argued that when variables such as a history of sexual abuse, group home experiences, and psychiatric placements were held constant, transracial adoptees were doing reasonably well (Rosenthal, Groze, and Curiel, 1990). Similarly, a 1988 study by Barth et al. concluded that transracial adoptions were no more likely to be unstable than same-race adoptions when other salient variables such as age, sex, health and previous disrupted placements were held constant (Barth et al., 1988).

Several longitudinal studies tracking the adjustment of transracially adopted children from childhood to adolescence or adulthood have also concluded that transracial adoption poses no barriers to the growth and development of Black children. Shireman and Johnson (1986) compared African American children adopted by white and African American families when the children were ages 4, 8, 12, 16, and 20, and concluded on the basis of parental reports, direct observation and standardized testing that the overall adjustment of transracially adopted children was excellent. Feigelman and Silverman's (1984) longitudinal study of white, Korean, Columbian and African American children adopted by 372 white families reconfirmed the results of their earlier studies: African American children manifested greater maladjustment, but this was related to the age of the children. A British study of Afro-Caribbean and mixed race children adopted by white families examined the psychoneurosis, depression, free floating anxiety, self-esteem, identity, ego identity and self-image of 27 children in 1979 and again 12 years later. This study found no differences between the children on any measure (Bagley, 1993).

Perhaps the best known study of transracially adoptive children is

Simon and Alstein's 20 year study of Black, Korean, Native American, Eskimo, and Vietnamese children adopted by white couples in the Midwestern United States. This study began in 1971 with personal interviews of adopted children (aged 4-7 at the time) and their parents. Using the Kenneth Clark "doll" test and other projective tests, Simon and Alstein found children to have accurate racial self-identifications with no preference for white characteristics, or negative reactions to Black identity. In 1979, mail questionnaires and telephone interviews with several parents in the original sample revealed family tensions, with twenty percent of pre-adolescent children engaged in stealing possessions from other family members. Personal interviews with children and parents in 1983-84, however, revealed that such behaviors had stopped. Moreover, a "self-esteem scale" completed by children in this 1983-84 follow-up evaluation revealed similar scores on measures of self-esteem for Black and other transracially adopted children and for Black and white children. Similarly, few differences were found among children's scores on a "family integration scale." The final stage of Simon and Alstein's study was conducted in 1990-91, when adult transracially adopted children and their parents were again interviewed. Most children and parents interviewed responded positively to questions concerning their experiences with transracial adoption. On the basis of these follow-up data collected in these four evaluation periods, Simon and Alstein concluded that, in general, transracial adoptees grow up well-adjusted and, in particular, that African American children adopted by white families fare no worse than other children (Simon and Alstein, 1992; Simon, Alstein and Melli, 1994; Simon, 1996).

Indeed, according to some researchers, African American children adopted by white families fare *better* than African American children adopted by Black families. Moore's (1986) comparison of 23 transracially adopted and 23 inracially adopted Black children, for example, revealed that children adopted by white families scored higher on IQ tests and were more assertive. Similarly, other researchers point out that Black children adopted by white families have equivalent IQ scores to those of other adopted children in similar families and scholastic achievement that surpasses that of Black children raised in Black communities. These researchers see these findings as evidence of the beneficial results of transracial adoption (Scarr and Weinberg, 1976; Weinberg, Scarr and Waldmann, 1992).

### METHODOLOGICAL FLAWS IN RESEARCH ON TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION

These research studies performed over the past 25 years have been widely used to accuse NABSW and other opponents of transracial adoption of having irrational racial fears and prejudice. Even researchers, such as Alexander and Curtis (1996), who question the scientific methodology of prevailing transracial adoption studies, have been critical of NABSW for failing to provide "scientific" underpinnings for its claim that transracial adoption may be harmful to Black children:

Opponents of transracial adoption, such as NABSW and other African American professionals, had no empirical support for their positions. They stated the African Americans encountered significant mental health problems by their placement in White families, but could not produce any empirical studies supporting their position . . . Because no empirical research existed to support this contention, courts have been forced to accept the findings of proponents of transracial adoptions. (Alexander and Curtis, 1996, p. 232)

Although it is true that courts and legislators have accepted research findings concluding that transracial adoption is in the best interests of Black children, it seems premature to conclude that we are *forced*, by reason alone, to accept these findings. Indeed, the methodological flaws in these studies are plentiful and suggest the need for a healthy skepticism concerning researchers' conclusions. For example, descriptive studies, such as those performed by Grow and Shapiro (1974) and Johnson, Shireman and Watson (1987), provide no information concerning the relationship between and among variables (Alexander and Curtis, 1996, p. 225). Multivariate analyses correct for this problem, but most of these studies have been cross-sectional designs using surveys.

Cross-sectional design studies face problems of their own. First, they provide only a "snapshot" of transracial adoption at one point in time. Thus they do not reveal information concerning how the adjustment of the adopted child to her or his environment changes over time (Alexander and Curtis, 1996, p. 227-228). Secondly, the surveys conducted measure the adopted child's "adjustment" or "maladjust-

ment" according to parental responses. Parents are often reluctant, however, to admit to parenting difficulties and this phenomenon could be exacerbated in the case of white adoptive parents who may fear they would be blamed for inadequately parenting their Black children. Testing the accuracy of their parents' responses about their adjustment would require more direct observation of the adopted children themselves and their interactions with and attitudes toward their adoptive environments. Third, the use of survey methods may result in a sample biased by variables related to who completes the survey. This is especially worrisome where non-response rates are high (Grotevant, 1996, p. 15). Studies, such as those conducted by Silverman and Feigelman (1981) and Rosenthal, Groze and Curiel (1990) which conclude that no significant relation exists between transracial adoption and emotional and social adjustment, are based on survey return rates of less than 65%. Insofar as parents may be reluctant to admit publicly to parenting difficulties, it is plausible that adoptive families encountering difficulties are apt to be among those 35-40% who chose not to participate in the study.

Longitudinal studies avoid the "snapshot" problem, enabling the researcher to examine a child's long-term growth and development. However, longitudinal studies present interpretive challenges. First, as Barth and Brooks (1997) note, many families who adopted children twenty to twenty-five years ago were strongly influenced by the civil rights movement (p. 52). The 1990s have been characterized, in part, by an erosion of earlier civil rights legislation accompanied by a public perception that racism is no longer a serious problem in the U.S. Hence, whether conclusions regarding the success of adoptions in the 1970s are applicable to today's adoptive placements is an important question. Answering this question requires more attention to the actual and potential effects of historical conditions on adoptive placements and outcomes than is typically given. In addition, longitudinal studies are often problematic due to a loss of contact between researchers and some of the families in the original study sample. This may lead to results skewed toward positive conclusions about transracial adoption. It is possible that those families who drop out of longitudinal studies, like those who fail to participate in surveys used in multivariate analyses, are precisely those families encountering difficulties. Third, the credibility of longitudinal studies, like multivariate analyses, is affected by the validity of methods used to test the well-

being of the child. To the extent that these studies also rely on parental or teacher assessments of a child's adjustment, many questions remain. Even clinical ratings of an adopted child's psychosocial functioning may "provide little insight into the child's own perceptions of this unique family arrangement" (Penn and Coverdale, 1996, p. 244). Finally, to the extent that longitudinal studies, such as the research of Simon and Alstein (1994), utilize primarily descriptive analysis, rather than multivariate analysis, no firm conclusions about the correlation of children's well-being and race can be drawn (Alexander and Curtis, 1996, p. 231).

In addition to the specific difficulties encountered by these various types of studies, two more general and serious problems pervade research on transracial adoption. The first problem concerns overall sampling methods. In none of these studies has a random probability sampling of all families who have adopted transracially been conducted. Researchers have largely used local samples available to them and then "confidently extrapolated their findings to the entire country" (Alexander and Curtis, 1996, p. 231). Simon and Alstein (1992), for example, base their conclusion that transracial adoptions should be encouraged on a sample of Midwestern U.S. families who belonged to two organizations (the Open Door Society and the Council on Adoptable Children). Whether or not these families are representative of white families who have adopted Black children is an important question which Simon and Alstein leave largely unaddressed. The second, and perhaps more intractable, problem encountered in almost all of these studies is the Eurocentric standard of measurement used to assess the impact of transracial adoption on Black and other ethnic minority children.

#### **EUROCENTRISM IN RESEARCH ON TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION**

Both implicit and explicit definitions of "success" and "well-being" as applied to the children of transracial adoptions exhibit a form of what Frye (1983) terms "whitewashing." A majority of the studies claiming positive outcomes of transracial adoption are based on findings that Black children adopted by white families compare favorably on various measures to white adopted children. This difficulty is especially pronounced in the IQ studies that conclude Black children may,

in fact, be better off in white homes than in Black ones. The problem with such reasoning, as Penn and Coverdale (1996) note, is that "it assumes that so long as African American and other children perform as White children perform, they are showing good adjustment. Conversely, deviations from the standards set by Whites tend to be interpreted as evidence of maladjustment, intellectual deficiency, or dysfunction" (p. 244).

Several African American psychologists have produced research discrediting the assumption that the psychological or behavioral functioning of whites provides a universal standard of good mental health (see, e.g., Nobles, 1991; Shade, 1991; White, 1991). Similarly, other scholars of color have argued against the cultural validity of psychological cognitive tests (see, e.g., Helms, 1992; Hilliard, 1996; Sandoval et al., 1998). This body of research has been largely ignored in most of the studies supporting transracial adoption and by those who accept these studies' results.

An Eurocentric standard of measurement is also implicitly maintained in the very notion, accepted by both lawyers and social scientists, that individual well-being and group well-being are separate issues. As Goddard (1996) notes, the assumed separateness of personal self-concept and group identity may make little sense from an Africentric perspective:

... the African self is an extended self within which the individual identity and sense of purpose comes from the collective being and identity with the collective. Yet the scientific literature deals with self-concept and measures it in terms of an individual self and individual identity. The individual self derives from one's separateness and difference from all others. The African self derives from one's connection to and similarity with others. Thus, if one uses scales designed to measure the individual self (from the European perspective) to measure the African self (designed to represent the collective being), then that assessment is meaningless. (Goddard, 1996, p. 279)

Indeed, as Goddard (1996) suggests, much of the research on the well-being or "adjustment" of transracially adopted Black children focuses primarily or exclusively on individualistic conceptions of self-esteem. As Imani (1996) notes, traditional studies of Black self-esteem and collective identity in the U.S. have been characterized by a sys-

tematic "failure to distinguish personal identity (PI) from reference group orientation (RGO) methodologically" (p. 195). This led in the 1950s and '60s to the notion that Blacks exhibited self-hatred (a PI-related hypothesis), developed on the accumulation of evidence from RGO studies (Imani, 1996, p. 196). In the present case, PI measures and RGO measures are correlated to the opposite effect. Studies on the adjustment of Black children adopted by white couples utilize measures of PI in order to dispute NABSW's claim that Black children are harmed by transracial adoption. However, the methods used in these studies of Black children largely fail to address NABSW's contention that Black children raised in white homes may be robbed of their cultural heritage and group identity. As Leora Neal, executive director of the Child Adoption, Counseling and Referral Service at NABSW's New York chapter claims: "I could like myself, but not necessarily like the people I come from and not be able to identify with other Blacks. These psychological tests don't test for that" (Neal quoted in Glazer, 1993, 1042; see also DeBerry et al., 1996, p. 2377).

Indeed, in one of the few early studies that explicitly distinguished self-esteem measures and racial identity measures, McRoy et al. (1982) found that, although transracially and intracracially adopted children exhibit no differences in self-esteem, transracially adopted children score lower on scales evaluating racial identity (see also Andujo, 1988; Curtis, 1996; Small, 1984). Although stopping short of recommending against transracial adoption, McRoy et al. (1982) concluded that white families were able to provide a loving home for children, but many were unable to instill a sense of positive ethnic identity for their transracially adopted children. Similarly, a more recent study by Brenner (1993) found that Black children were less comfortable with their physical appearance than white and Asian adoptees and were more likely to engage in searches for their birthfamilies. Surprisingly, Brenner (1993), after noting a number of difficulties unique to Black children adopted by white families, concluded that no significant difference existed between transracially and intracracially adopted children. DeBerry et al.'s (1996) longitudinal study of 88 African-American transracial adoptees found significantly decreased Africentric Group Orientation correlated with increased Eurocentric Group Orientation in adolescence. This, coupled with higher than average maladjustment scores for adolescent adoptees, suggest

adoptive stressors unique to transracially adopted populations. As Deberry et al. (1996) conjecture:

Perhaps the grieving process for transracial adoptees reflects *both* a loss of biological parents *and* a loss of culture and heritage. Although transracial adoptees evince signs of intellectual and academic competence, suggesting that their esteem needs are met, other needs involving belongingness remain unfulfilled. (p. 2390)

Transracial adoptees may experience converse "acculturation stress" in interactions with other members of their own ethnic group and racial stress attributable to their appearance in interacting with others of their adoptive families' ethnicity (Deberry et al., 1996, pp. 2390-91). Anecdotal evidence supports these interpretations, suggesting that at least some transracially adopted children may suffer "isolation," "a sense of lost identity," "emotional yearning," "cultural estrangement" and inadequate preparation for dealing with societal racism (Curtis, 1996; Williams 1995; Willis, 1996). These results are consistent with NABSW's concerns about the potentially harmful effects of transracial adoptions on Black children.

Knowledge of one's racial identity and cultural heritage are seen as critical factors in promoting positive self-esteem in Black children and socializing them to effectively cope with racism (McAdoo, 1997; McAdoo and McAdoo, 1995). Everett, Chipungu and Leashore (1991) also view having a sense of one's cultural legacy as essential in mitigating the negative impact of racism on the survival, self-esteem and security of African Americans. As noted by Franklin and Boyd-Franklin (1985), "a key issue in the argument against placing African American children in white homes is the belief that they would be deprived of their cultural ancestry, identity and self esteem" (p. 204).

Children develop emotional resiliency and an ability to cope when they are able to learn about and take pride in their cultural heritage (Greene, 1990). Black parents are seen as better able than their white counterparts to racially socialize and assist their children in acquiring an appreciation for the richness and usefulness of their cultural legacy. In some ways, Black parents may find the socialization of Black children easier to do because the parents "have internally developed patterns of coping with racial oppression, strategies proven to be effective in the past that are incorporated into their own socialization process" (Peters and Massey, 1988, p. 3).

McAdoo (1997) also believes that Black parents, based on their own experiences with oppression and discrimination, are better equipped to help their children deal with their need to integrate African American and Euro-American cultural values in order to achieve and to succeed in school, employment and social interactions. McAdoo sees integration of these values as essential because "Black parents recognize that their children must be accepted in the Black community in order to have friends, and they must be accepted into the white community in order to survive" (1997, p. 177). Parents must be able to perform a delicate balancing act when helping their children learn about racism: they must assist their children to learn effective coping skills without either overwhelming or overprotecting them. As Greene (1990) notes:

A major task confronting Black children rests in the challenge to survive in a society where they must incorporate the dominant values of the society, which include an insidious devaluation of non-white persons, while simultaneously incorporating the values of a Black community. Another task involves developing one's natural abilities and endowments when a large portion of one's creative energy must be used simply to survive. (p. 217)

NABSW's opposition to transracial adoption has been to a large extent the organization's attempt to ensure that Black children acquire the survival skills needed to deal with societal racism. Helping Black children to obtain these skills has been viewed as an enormous task for Black parents and probably a formidable, if not impossible one, for white parents.

#### **DEVELOPING AN AFRICENTRIC APPROACH TO RESEARCH ON TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION**

The Eurocentric focus of many studies on transracial adoption has led some social scientists to advocate for an alternative research direction for investigating and interpreting the experiences of transracially adopted Black children. One alternative approach that has emerged, and which appear to provide a useful framework for examining adoption outcomes, results in what Asante (1998) describes as "other ways of knowing" (p. 179) by using an African-centered worldview. While



this African-centered orientation is labeled "Afrocentric" in much of the literature, recently African American scholars have begun to use the labels "Africancentric" (Ani, 1994; Kambon, 1992) and "Africancentric" (Akbar, 1984; Daly et al., 1995; Everett et al., 1991) when discussing the need for use of an African worldview as an approach for overcoming some of the conceptual gaps and failures of Eurocentric models when conducting research. Here the term "Africancentric" will be used when referring to this orientation.

Everett, Chipugu and Leashore (1991) indicate that a worldview is the way in which people perceive their relationship to nature, social institutions, other people, and objects in their life space. They indicate that:

Worldviews constitute psychological orientations to life and in part determine the way we think, behave, make decisions, and define events. Cultural experiences, life events, and value orientations are significant components of an individual's worldview, or cultural adaptation. In this context, racism is a critical factor affecting the worldview of minorities of color. (p. 16)

According to Willis (1996), an Africancentric worldview can be used to accomplish two critical activities: (1) "an analysis of European behavior from the African perspective" and (2) "the creation of a standard of appropriate behavior from the African perspective" (p. 249).

Carrying out the first of these activities, Willis analyzes standard arguments for easing transracial adoption from an Africancentric perspective, concluding that these arguments have been affected by a "process of scientific colonialism, which involves distorting information about subjects under study in a manner that insures the colonial control of people" (1996, p. 250). Willis notes that this process of scientific colonialism can manipulate data to support those in power. For example, a primary argument in support of transracial adoption cites the large number of African American children awaiting adoption and the scarcity of African American families to adopt them. Data cited typically indicate that of the children waiting adoption, at least 40% are African American (Willis, 1996, p. 250).

This argument, used in support of the revised Multiethnic Placement Act, obscures important issues, however. In particular, it fails to recognize an important distinction between different types of adoption situations: "One type consists of healthy children [typically girls] who are adopted as infants, usually through private adoption agencies . . .

Another group of adoptable children are those placed in foster care by the courts. These children are generally older . . . two thirds have special needs (physical, mental, or emotional challenges), many are boys, and many are part of a sibling group that wants to be kept intact" (Willis, 1996, p. 250).

Using an Africancentric perspective to analyze the behavior of whites who are adopting, Willis argues that by correlating these different adoption situations,

Scientific colonialism contrives a problem that results in Whites being justified in adopting African American babies as a solution. However, in actuality, Whites are competing with the African American families for the children in the first group—the healthy infant girls. White families are not lining up asking to adopt children in the second group, yet it is this second group that has the large numbers of African American children (43% of the pool) and larger numbers of White children (44% of the pool) waiting to be adopted. So the argument that Whites are helping to reduce the numbers of waiting African American children does not hold when the information is presented honestly. (1996, pp. 251)

Unfortunately, there is no reliable data on the racial breakdown of infants available for adoption, as most infant adoptions occur outside the public child welfare system and data on private adoptions are scarce. Of foster children legally free and awaiting adoption in 1990, only 4 percent were under age 1. These children were significantly more likely to be adopted within 3.5 years of care than those entering care after age 1, showing a preference for infants within the public adoption system (Spar, 1997, p. 3). This preference is further indicated by the fact that most infant adoptions are arranged by private agencies (29%) or are independent adoptions (31%) (Spar, 1997, p. 4). Given the cost of private, and especially independent adoptions, one can easily speculate that white families have more ready access to infants of ethnicity than do families of color.

The second task of Africancentric research is to create a standard of appropriate behavior from an African perspective (Daly, 1996, p. 249). As applied to research on the well-being of Black children, this task involves applying Africancentric principles and values when evaluating what is considered "normality" among Black children and Black

families. As Akbar (1984) points out, the standard which has been dominant in one in which

Normality is established on a model of the middle-class, Caucasian male of European descent. The more that one approximates this model in appearance, values and behavior, the more "normal" one is considered to be . . . [T]he more distant or distinct one is from this model the more pathological one is considered to be. The obvious advantage for Euro-Americans is that such norms confirm their reality as the reality. . . . (p. 397)

Use of an Africentric worldview can confirm that for Blacks there may be a *different reality*, one that "acknowledges affective reality as well as rationality, strives for system maintenance rather than individual material gain, and views humanity collectively through shared concern for others' well-being" (Daly et al., 1995, p. 240). Use of values and principles based on this worldview is illustrated in the work of Grills and Longshore (1996) who apply an Africentric approach to research based on the seven principles of Nguzo Saba: Umoja (unity), Kujichagulia (self-determination), Ujima (collective work and responsibility), Ujamaa (cooperative economics), Nia (purpose), Kuumba (creativity), and Imani (faith). Karenga (1988, p. 43) considers these seven principles the "minimum set of values (that) African Americans need to build and sustain an Afrocentric family, community and culture." Grills and Longshore (1996) indicate that the seven principles of Nguzo Saba as codes of conduct for daily life "are believed to represent guidelines for healthy living" (p. 88). For example, Grills and Longshore (1996) believe that "adherence to the value of Ujima might be manifested in daily life through volunteer service to the community" (p. 88).

Grills and Longshore (1996) have used these principles to develop an instrument containing 25 Likert-type items that can be used to obtain a self-reported measure of Africentrism, or adherence to the Nguzo Saba in African and African American culture. Although psychometric testing of this instrument continues, preliminary assessments suggest it may be more useful than other existing measures of ethnic identity and values in evaluating adherence of respondents to Africentric values, traditions and behavioral norms. In particular, a recommended 15 item version of the instrument appears both reliable and valid. It is able to capture significant correlations between Afri-

centrism and ethnic identity among known groups. Reliability (internal consistency) of the measure well exceeds minimum criteria for purposes of group comparisons and may also serve as a basis for non-clinical comparisons of African Americans at the individual level or for detecting individual change over time (Grills and Longshore, 1996, p. 101).

Although there are advocates for use of an Africentric worldview when conducting research, few researchers have actually begun to make use of this approach. While some researchers, such as Grills and Longshore (1966) have made an Africentric worldview central to their work, it is difficult to locate studies on transracial adoption that apply an Africentric worldview. Thus, here we offer merely some preliminary suggestions concerning possible research directions.

First, research on the well-being of Black children should use a nondeficit model in which "the dominant culture does not set the behavioral standard" (Daly et al. 1995, p. 246). Everett, Chipugu and Leashore (1991), in their review of research that has been used to establish child welfare programs and services, point out that a fundamental assumption of a deficit approach is that only the behaviors of white children are seen as representative of "normal" patterns of development. They contend that use of an Africentric perspective is much more appropriate when attempting to both explain and understand variations in behavior that may be observed among Black children. Rather than accepting the developmental patterns of white children as the standard for comparisons, this perspective makes it appropriate to compare the experiences of transracially adopted Black children with those of other Black children living in Black homes as well as other children of color (e.g., Hispanic children).

Second, it is important for research on the well-being of Black children to investigate issues of racial identity. As McIntosh (1980) claims, it is a privilege of dominant group status ("white privilege") to think in colorblind terms. Care needs to be taken however in developing racial identity measures that are appropriate, valid, and reliable. As Willis (1996) notes, tests such as the Clark Doll test fail to "measure anything more than a child's preference for a doll in a contrived, forced-choice situation (p. 249). Evaluating racial identity on the basis of forced choice attitudinal self-reports is also insufficient. Ideally, research design would permit data to be collected using both quantitative and qualitative research methods. For example, the Africentric

measure developed by Grills and Longshore (1996), which appears to be a useful standardized scale to assess what is considered "healthy living" of transracially adopted children, might be a resource for gathering quantitative information. In addition, qualitative methods (e.g., interviews) may need to be used to gain insight into accurate ways of interpreting the data. Listening to children's narratives about their racial experiences and correlated constructs, as have DeBerry et al. (1996) is a promising method, that should improve the reliability of results, while also respecting the oral history tradition of African-Americans. In analyzing these interviews, Africentric racial identity models such as Grills and Longshore's (1996) Nguzo Saba model or even Cross's (1978) psychological nigrescence model could be used.

Third, studies on children of color adopted by white families should test for ecological competence in age-appropriate ways. For children of color, ecological competence will require a developing understanding of racial issues and differences and the development of appropriate behaviors and strategies for interacting in settings of diverse racial compositions (DeBerry et al., p. 2376, 2394). Ecological appropriate models for studying Black children will recognize that they have multidimensional needs that require socialization for *both* Eurocentric values *and* Africentric values and behavior as described in the principles of Nguzo Saba. Such models will further recognize that Black children need to develop specific strategies for coping with racial discrimination and oppression.

Since racial identity and ecological competence are acquired gradually during a child's development, research on the well-being of Black children requires a longitudinal study design. Researchers note the advantages of longitudinal studies, versus other types of designs, when examining shifts in the attitudes and behaviors among specific subjects, particularly the same subjects at different time intervals as they grow and develop (Rubin and Babbie, 1997; Hadley and Mitchell, 1995).

One type of study design, which combines the cross-sectional and longitudinal approaches, is the cohort sequential design. Such a design permits repeated observation, measures, and comparisons of the same sample, or panel, of selected groups of adoptees of different ages (Rubin and Babbie, 1997). In using this design to conduct research on transracial adoption, cohorts, or groups of adoptees who are a certain number of years apart in age, would be identified for participation in

the study. For example, at the beginning of the study, adoptees might be selected to participate who are ages 10, 14, and 18. Then, at regularly scheduled intervals, for example every two years, data would be collected on these subjects. Data collection would continue every two years until the 10 year old adoptees became age 18. Every two years another new group of 10 year old adoptees would be added to the study.

The problems associated with previous longitudinal studies of transracially adopted children have included non-representative samples of research subjects, loss of contact between researchers and subjects, unreliable or biased methods for evaluating children's well-being, and difficulties in interpreting the data obtained. These difficulties are not insurmountable, however. A random probability sample of transracially adoptive families from across the U.S. could be used to generate research populations. Subject dropout can be reduced by utilizing sufficient numbers of research staff, selected in part for their potential to establish rapport with the subjects. Efforts can be made by research staff (e.g., regularly scheduled contacts with participants to reinforce the value of the study, their contributions to knowledge building) to ensure that few participants drop out because they lose interest in the study. Such regular contact with participants should also reduce the likelihood of losing track of participants who relocate between study intervals. Regular contact would, moreover, create an ongoing relationship between researchers and subjects that increases subjects' commitment to continued involvement in the study.

In order to ensure that interviewers can connect effectively with their interview subjects, care should be taken to select staff who are themselves ecologically competent in both white and Black cultures. Selecting staff competent in these ways will increase participants' willingness to answer questions openly and honestly; it will also help ensure that interpretations of the data gathered are accurate. In particular, if data are to be analyzed according to Africentric principles, the research staff needs a firm—and preferably experiential—understanding of these principles and values. As Code (1980) claims, the subjectivity of the researcher affects the research results. Finally, in order to assess the impact of historical circumstances on the success of transracial adoptions, it will be necessary to compare the experiences between, as well as among, different cohort groups over a suitable length of time.

It can be expensive, and quite difficult, to follow the same people

over a long time period. Nevertheless, steps such as those outlined above, will be necessary in order to ensure the validity of research results.

### CONCLUSION

A number of developments have led to greater public support for the adoption of African American children by white families: a decline in the number of healthy, white infants available for adoption; a growing number of Black children in the child welfare system; and the limited success experienced by many foster care agencies in securing Black adoptive families for Black Children. However, as Curtis (1996) notes:

The problems of foster care-drift and minority overrepresentation in the child-placement system will not be solved by placing African American children in White homes. It is ironic that those espousing policies that are in the best interests of children seldom address the issues of licensing more African American families or eliminating the institutional barriers that inhibit the effective recruitment and retention of African American foster and adoptive parents; even less attention is given to addressing the economic and social conditions that prevent growing numbers of families, regardless of race, to care effectively for their children. (p. 163)

Adoption policy and practice in the U.S. has always been guided by the principle that placement decisions should be made in the best interests of the child (Gabor and Aldridge, 1994; Goldstein, Freud, Solnit and Goldstein, 1996). Yet, there appears to be no simple solution for the problems that arise when attempting to serve the best interest of Black children who are at risk of growing up without permanent families. Several studies have found that children who grow up in foster care tend to become adults who are socially isolated, who attain low levels of formal education, who have high unemployment levels, and who are over-represented among the homeless (Lindsey, 1994; Sosin, Piliavin, and Westerfelt, 1991). As Taylor and Thornton (1996) note, perhaps "ultimately the welfare of Black children will be advanced by a thorough understanding of the dynamics

and consequences of transracial adoption, more aggressive and innovative strategies to enlarge the pool of Black prospective parents and a full exploration of other alternatives to foster care (e.g., family preservation, surrogate parenting)" (p. 289).

There are indications that sufficient numbers of families of color are available to adopt healthy infants of color if these families are appropriately recruited and the traditional barriers to their being able to adopt are eliminated (Hollingsworth, 1998). Adoption programs need to make services more responsive to the needs of families of color. Agency recruitment, eligibility and placement policies need to be more compatible with the culture, circumstances and lifestyles of African American families. For example, Taylor and Thornton (1996) indicate that the grandparents of Black children are often not considered as a viable alternative to transracial adoption, although family preservation programs, including programs for grandparents functioning as surrogate parents have utility for maintaining children within their extended families (p. 288).

The need to look at innovative, but realistic, alternatives to transracial adoption was addressed by NABSW (1994) in its most recent position statement. NABSW noted that:

... family preservation, reunification and adoption should work in tandem toward finding permanent homes for children. Priority should be given to preserving families through the reunification or adoption of children with/by biological relatives. If that should fail, secondary priority should be given to the placement of a child within his own race. Transracial adoption of an African-American child should only be considered after documented evidence of unsuccessful same race placements have been reviewed and supported by appropriate representatives of the African-American community. Under no circumstances should successful same race placements be impeded by obvious barriers (i.e., legal limits of states, state boundaries, fees, surrogate payments, intrusive application, lethargic court systems, inadequate staffing patterns, etc.). (p. 4)

Several programs have been successful in mobilizing and utilizing community based support services to allow Black children to remain with their relatives and to recruit families of color to adopt. For example, the family reunification project at the Howard University School

of Social Work has shown that African American children in foster care could be successfully reunited with either their biological parents or adopted by other members of their extended families (Everett, Chipungu and Leashore, 1991).

Washington (1987) points out that when emphasis is "placed on the importance of cultural heritage in adoptive placements for Black children, there have been increased efforts to recruit Black adoptive families" (p. 57). She describes one such recruitment effort, the Friends of Black Children model, as an example of a community organization approach that eliminated most of the barriers to the recruitment, preparation and retention of Black adoptive families. This program, as well as the successes of other programs such as Homes for Black Children and One Church, One Child, point to the need for agencies to actively recruit Black adoptive families by developing and using adoption strategies that are designed to find Black homes for Black children that look beyond traditional adoption families (Hariston and Williams, 1989).

Although more than 25 years have passed since NABSW first objected to the practice of placing Black children with white families because of its concerns about the developmental outcomes for African American children, particularly fear that these children would lose their cultural heritage and racial identity, the adoption of children of color by white families continues to be debated. NABSW, policy makers, practitioners, and others who remain critical of transracial adoption contend that this practice is not supported by research. As described here, the methodological flaws in many of the studies on transracial adoption, particularly the Eurocentrism that underlies assessment of its impact, suggest that those who currently oppose transracial adoption may indeed have a point. Studies need to be conducted, using nonEurocentric measures, that examine the potential outcomes of transracial adoption for children of color: identity conflicts that these children might experience, their loss of cultural heritage, and their inability to effectively cope with racism. There is a critical need for much better research on transracial adoption before concluding that this practice is always in the "best interests" of African American and other ethnic minority children. Even though such research will probably not silence the debate about transracial adoption, it will be an invaluable resource in dealing effectively and realistically with the

controversy that continues to surround how we respond to the needs of children of color.

In particular, although it would be naïve to think that further data concerning the well-being of transracially adopted children will, by itself, resolve policy issues relating to the adoption of Black children by whites, such data—especially if collected and analyzed from an Africentric perspective, might help to change the focus of our debates and policy-making. No one, including the National Association of Black Social Workers, denies that we face a foster care crisis: nationwide, there are approximately one half-million children in foster care (Rubin 1996, p. 1226); approximately 100,000 of these children are eligible for adoption; 40 percent of children eligible for adoption are Black (Kennedy 1994, p. 8). No one denies that permanency planning is crucial for the well-being of these children. No child should be left indefinitely to languish in foster care. To date, however, public policy has focused primarily on transracial adoption as the panacea for burgeoning foster care rolls. Research purporting to show that ethnic minority children thrive when placed in white families has encouraged this policy direction and facilitated the passage of legislation—such as the revised MEPA and more recent erosion of the Indian Child Welfare Act—that eases the adoption of ethnic minority children by white families.

This policy direction is, at best, short-sighted however. First, pretending that transracial adoption is a solution to the foster care crisis, obscures the fact that the majority of children in foster care are school-aged children, often with physical, mental or emotional difficulties. While legislation easing transracial adoption has led to increased adoption of ethnic minority infants by white couples, there remains a significant shortage of families willing to adopt the children who do indeed languish in foster care. That barriers to transracial adoption have not been the issue here is indicated by the fact that 44% of these foster care children are white ("Facts on Adoption" 1995). Second, current policy discussions rarely mention intra-ethnic adoption as a viable alternative for foster children. This is odd given that Blacks have participated in the informal adoption of children, both historically and currently, at rates greatly exceeding white participation (McRoy 1989) and that one-third of Black heads of household have expressed interest in formally adopting a Black child (Hill 1993). As NABSW (1994) has claimed, Black families have been largely screened out of

formal adoption processes by white social workers ignorant of Black culture (see also McRoy 1989, 154). In evaluations of family fitness, as in evaluations of children's well-being, Eurocentric standards of measurement privilege whiteness, thus encouraging the adoption of ethnic minority children by whites. Research investigating the well-being of children that was conducted from an Africentric perspective might help to shift our attention to the intersecting needs and strengths of both Black children and Black families.

Such a shift in our attention should be welcomed by any person who truly hopes to stem the tide of ethnic minority children in foster care. Ultimately, if we are to solve the foster-care crisis, we must do so by attending to the circumstances that lead children to be placed in foster care in the first place. In its 1994 position statement, NABSW criticized prevailing policies and laws facilitating transracial adoption as containing an "anti-family bias" and focussed on family preservation as its top priority.

NABSW's position is to advocate for keeping families together and keeping children safe through family preservation services . . . Transracial placement/adoption is a divisive issue within the child welfare arena and, more importantly, is often used as a barrier to family preservation . . . NABSW is in full support of permanency planning for all children . . . when family preservation, family reunification, and relative placement have failed, then, and only then, should we seek adoption. (quoted in Abdullah, p. 257)

Few could disagree that the issue of transracial adoption has been a divisive one. Indeed, this issue as currently framed may well be irresolvable. Nonetheless further research may help us to reframe our discussions in ways that underwrite more productive policy decisions. So long as we insist on measuring the well-being of ethnic minority children in Eurocentric ways that isolate their presumed well-being from the well-being of their families and ethnic communities, we will continue to engage in superficial ideological debates concerning the appropriate placement of displaced children. More adequate research would highlight the connections between children, families, and ethnic communities and, at its best, enrich our public discourse and improve our social policies concerning the well-being of all three.

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