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# 'Acting White' and 'Acting Black' Exploring Transracial Adoption, Middle-Class Families, and Racial Socialization

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## 'Acting White' and 'Acting Black': Exploring Transracial Adoption, Middle-Class Families, and Racial Socialization

*Colleen Butler-Sweet*

Black children belong physically and psychologically and culturally in Black families where they receive the total sense of themselves and develop a sound projection of their future. Only a Black family can transmit the emotional and sensitive subtleties of perceptions and reactions essential for a Black child's survival in a racist society. Human beings are products of their environment and develop their sense of values, attitudes, and self-concept within their own family structures. Black children in white homes are cut off from the healthy development of themselves as Black people. (National Association of Black Social Workers, 1972, pp. 2–3)

More than 35 years ago the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) formally declared its opposition to transracial adoption (TRA), particularly the adoption of black children by white families. While the controversy reached a fever pitch in 1972 with the NABSW position paper, the debate surrounding transracial adoption has waned over the past decade. The controversy has been recently re-ignited, however, due to high profile transracial adoptions by celebrities and other public figures including Sandra Bullock, Angelina Jolie, and Madonna. The transracial adoption controversy of the 1970s and today typically focuses on concerns that white families, no matter how well intentioned, may be ill-equipped to help black children survive in a racist society and develop a healthy sense of themselves and racial identity (Grow and Shapiro, 1974b; McRoy and Zurcher, 1983; Simon and Alstein, 2002). Critiques are often based on assumptions about the identity of black children raised by their biological parents, yet there is little focus placed on black children raised in black homes who may or may not also struggle with racial identity development. Moreover, while the race

of parents in relation to children is at the center of the transracial adoption debate, studies rarely delve into socialization practices of biracial families headed by one white and one black parent.

Most studies of transracial adoption also overlook the importance of class in shaping identity. Similar to the understanding that family is critical to racial identity formation, socioeconomic class also has a tremendous impact on how parents socialize their children (Brimeyer et al., 2006; Derenne and Tai, 1975; Hansen, 2005; Hochschild, 1989; Kohn and Schooler, 1983; Lareau, 2003). The small but important literature that does exist on middle-class black identity suggests that the experience of being black and middle-class *is* different from that of the black working-class and poor.

Recently, Lacy (2007) has found that the black middle-class faces a dilemma whereby the disadvantages of being black and the advantages of being middle-class are combined, shaping a complex and multidimensional middle-class black identity. However, most of the literature on transracial adoption tends to overlook the importance of socioeconomic class. Moreover, the majority of research on transracial families focuses on middle-class informants, while research on black families typically focuses on the working-class and poor (Lamb, 1999; McAdoo, 2006; Taylor et al., 1990; Willie, 1991). To fully understand and fairly compare racial identity development for black youths from different racial family backgrounds, it is necessary to understand the impact of class on their racial identity development.

The first objective of this chapter is to explore transracial adoption more broadly by focusing on a range of parent/child race relationships, including biracial families. By comparing the experiences of young black adults raised in families with two black parents (monoracial), one white and one black parent (biracial), and two white parents (transracial), this study offers a more complete analysis of the impact of parental race on the identity development of black youths. The second objective of this chapter is to consider the implications of class in relation to racial identity construction within the family. This study controls for class by focusing exclusively on middle-class informants from monoracial, biracial, and transracial families. In doing so, there is an emphasis on middle-class black identity and how it is learned and negotiated in families where parents and children may or may not be of the same race. Consequently, the overarching theme of this chapter explores how middle-class status, along with the experience of growing up in monoracial, biracial, and transracial families, shapes dynamics of black identity.

## **Race, class, and transracial adoption: a literature review**

### **Racial identity formation**

The debate surrounding transracial adoption is anchored in the broader literature on black identity and the importance of family to racial identity