

**“I started to feel not ashamed of who I was”:
Transracially Adopted Adults and Adoption Support**

Abstract

Transracially adopted adults are largely invisible as users of adoption support services in England and their voice is rarely heard in debates regarding appropriate adoption support provision. This article draws on findings from interviews with transracially adopted adults and transracially adopted adult participants at a lesbian, gay and bisexual focus group, carried out as part of a mixed method study of service users’ views and experiences of post-adoption services in England delivered by an independent post adoption agency, the West Midlands Post Adoption Service (WMPAS) (now After Adoption). The article opens by outlining the policy context and what we already know from existing research about the experiences of domestic transracially adopted adults in England. It then looks at a small group (n=12) of transracially adopted adults’ experience of receiving adoption support services. Drawing on their own words, it describes briefly the difference that adoption support services can make, before highlighting gaps in existing service provision and identifying some of the support needs specific to this group, as identified by themselves. The article closes with a discussion of the implications for the provision of adoption support services and makes some tentative suggestions for the provision of adoption support.

Legal and policy context

No figures are available on the number of domestic transracial adoptions in England (local authorities have only been required by the government to collect statistics on the ethnicity of children who are adopted since 2000/2001) (Selwyn et al. 2010). We know historically there has been a direct correlation between social factors and an increase in domestic transracial adoption, also referred to as ‘transethnic adoption’ (Wainright and Ridley 2012 p51). It was with the decline in white babies available for adoption from the late 1960s onwards (from 14,000 in 1968 to 1,400 in 1988) (Prevatt Goldstein and Spencer 2000) that transracial adoption became an established practice. In line with practice in the 1990s and 2000s of considering race and ethnicity amongst a range of important considerations when matching children and prospective adoptive parents, transracial adoption has continued as a placement option for black and minority ethnic children. Although most social workers view a ‘same race’ placement as best able to meet a child’s needs (Selwyn et al. 2010), black and minority ethnic children continue to be viewed by many adoption professionals as ‘difficult to place’ (Adoption Register for England and Wales 2009-2010, p5), particularly mixed ethnicity children (Selwyn et al. 2010).

Despite the politicisation of adoption and ‘race’, the practice of transracial adoption has continued in England, particularly for disabled children (Ivaldi 2000). BAAF (Dance 1997) in a national survey with a response rate of less than 50%, found that overall 17% of minority ethnic adoptions were transracial (reaching 50% in shire counties). More recently, the Adoption Register for England and Wales reported that of the 335 children matched with adoptive parents through the Register in 2010-11

and then formally at Panel, 16 per cent (52) were ‘outside the child’s ethnicity’ (Adoption Register 2011 p10). However, in the absence of national statistics, we do not know how many domestic transracial adoptees are potential users of adoption support services.

Despite the historically high rates of adoption (Barn and Kirton 2012), the government ‘wants to see more children being adopted by loving families without delay’ (TSO 2013 p9). It has increased the speed with which prospective adoptive parents are assessed, viewing length of time as a major barrier to adoption. It has sought to reduce the weight attached to race and ethnicity in matching, viewing this as causing delay and the reason why black and minority ethnic children wait longer for an adoptive family (Dfe 2012; Dfe 2013). A more nuanced understanding is put forward by Barn and Kirton (2013) who examine the experiences of different ethnic groups, stating that it is children of Pakistani and Bangladeshi parentage and African children who are ‘least likely to be adopted’ (p26), while mixed ethnicity children are more likely to be adopted (Thoburn et al. 2000; Selwyn et al. 2010; Barn and Kirton 2012), often by white families (Selwyn et al. 2010), having the highest adoption rate of any ethnic group (Statham and Owen 2009). Rates are lower for Black Caribbean children and lower still for African children (Barn and Kirton 2012). Regarding timescales, rates are comparable across ethnicities, with the exception of black children who take significantly longer to place (Barn and Kirton 2012). Selwyn argues this delay is due to several factors, including entering care at an older age, a lack of black and minority ethnic adopters, poor social work practice (Parliament UK 2013), the age structure of communities (Frazer and Selwyn 2005) and poverty, low income and housing (Selwyn et al. 2004), while others highlight that adoption is

lowest amongst communities where religious or cultural objections to legal adoption may exist (Barn and Kirton 2012). However, there is a shortage of adoptive parents from all ethnic groups including white British (Adoption Register for England and Wales 2013), with government concern about the delay all children experience waiting for an adoptive family (DfE 2012; TSO 2013), including delay due to the courts (Ministry of Justice 2011; Ofsted 2012). For a small minority of children, an adoptive family is never found (Selwyn et al. 2010; Ofsted 2012).

The absence of recruitment strategies to ensure a sufficient supply of black and minority ethnic adoptive families (SSI 2000; Selwyn et al. 2010), alongside the government’s position, suggests transracial adoption is likely to become the government’s preferred placement option for black and minority ethnic children. Indeed, the government’s, *An Action Plan on Adoption* (DfE 2012) failed to mention recruiting black and minority ethnic adoptive parents, espousing instead a ‘colour blind’ and ‘love is enough’ rhetoric:

... it is not in the best interests of children for social workers to introduce any delay at all into the adoption process in the search for a perfect or even partial ethnic match when parents who are otherwise suitable are available and able to provide a loving and caring home for the child (DfE 2012 p22).

Not only is the notion of a ‘perfect match’ (DfE 2012 p22) a fallacy, ‘futile’ and an over simplification given the evolving and ‘fluid’ nature of ethnicity and culture (Wainright and Ridley 2012 p58) but reference to “prospective adopters being supported to help a child overcome racism and discrimination...have gone” from the

Statutory guidance (Dunster 2012 p32). Significantly, s.3 Children and Families Act 2014 removes race, culture, religion and language from the list of considerations adoption agencies must give ‘due consideration’ to when making an adoptive placement (TSO 2014). Yet, there is no evidence that this will result in more black and Asian children being adopted by white parents (The Evans B Donaldson Institute 2008; BAAF 2013). This risks these significant elements of identity being overlooked in matching decisions (Barn 2013), plus they remain important considerations when providing adoption support services (BAAF 2013). This repeal may be viewed as an attack on ethnicity and matching, an ‘ideological’ ‘race and adoption crusade’ (Barn 2013), under the guise of reducing delay. On the other hand, writers on ethnic mixing and mixedness highlight the diversity among mixed families and argue that ‘family difference may be important or it may not’ (Caballero et al. 2012 p22). It ‘occurs against the backdrop of a broader debate over the continuing significance of race’ in society (Trenka et al. 2006 p5) and the alleged failure of multiculturalism (Phoenix and Simmonds 2012).

There is a dearth of literature concerning the experiences of domestic transracially adopted children and adults in the UK. Research has been dominated by a tendency to ‘whitewash’ any difficulties in such placements and a concern to defend transracial adoption against the challenges made against it, including minimising the significance of race and racism (Kirton 2000). Further, there are methodological limitations to those studies that do exist both in the UK (Rushton and Minnis 1997; Kirton 2000) and USA (Samuels 2010). Research has paid negligible attention to the experiences of transracially adopted children and adults, as described in their own words, focusing primarily on placement outcomes (Kirton 2000), but without viewing race and culture

as central to outcomes (Samuels 2010 p27). Outcomes have been found to be positive in the UK (Rushton and Minnis 1997) and USA (Feigelman 2000; Evans B Donaldson Institute 2008). These tend to allow children’s perspectives to be mediated through their adoptive parents or assume children will speak about race and racism with a virtual stranger (Kirton 2000). Further, research has tended to conflate race with culture (Samuels 2010). Although disruptions are no higher than in ‘same race’ placements in the UK and USA (Quinton 2012; Feigelman 2000) some question whether all placements are successful when outcome measures include satisfaction or racial and cultural pride (Moffat and Thoburn 2001) or argue that multiple measures are needed (Burrow and Finley 2004). Crucially, UK research has not explored transracial adoptees’ experience of childhood into adulthood (Rushton and Minnis 1997) although this is beginning to be addressed in the USA (Feigelman 2000; Samuels 2009, 2010). Neither has it explored their adoption support needs, or their experience of receiving those adoption support services that do exist.

We do know transracial adoption is more common for younger children and Black children with one white parent in the UK and the USA (Thoburn et al. 2000; Samuels 2009; Selwyn et al. 2010). In historic placements, these children tended to see themselves as ‘ “white” in all but skin colour’ (Gill and Jackson 1983 p81), as culturally white (Samuels 2010), and were less likely to identify as black (Quinton 2012), with adopters taking a colour-blind approach to parenting (Kirton et al. 2000; Kirton 2000; Samuels 2009). Many of these children had little or no contact with other black people, growing up in predominantly or exclusively white communities in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s (Gill and Jackson 1983; Samuels 2009) and had engaged in attempts at ‘whitening’ themselves (Kirton 2000; Kirton et al 2000 p9). In the

USA many transracially adopted children struggle with racial appearance discomfort and to develop a positive racial and ethnic identity, plus experience racial discrimination, particularly African American males (The Evans B Donaldson Institute 2008).

Looking back at their childhoods, UK and USA transracial domestic adoptees of historical placements have reported significant experiences of racism, sometimes within the immediate and extended family and school (Kirton 2000; Samuels 2010), including widespread racist bullying (Shekleton 1990; Kirton 2000; Kirton et al. 2000; Patel 2009), verbal abuse and violence, with school the most frequent location (Kirton 2000; Kirton et al. 2000). Kirton’s (2000) study with ten UK transracially adopted adults found they had ‘an uneasy...relationship with ‘whiteness’ and an equally ambivalent one with ‘community of origin’, characterised by a powerful gravitational pull but also by distance and discomfort’ (p90). They felt unsupported and had protected their parents from learning about their experiences of racism. Similarly, USA transracially adopted adults experienced ‘highly racialised worlds’ as children (Samuels 2009 p80) and felt ‘racially alienated’ (Samuels 2009 p86). Patel’s (2009) more recent study of six UK transracially adopted adults found they had developed a ‘positive’ ‘mixed racial identity’ (p103), although the process had been difficult.

Significantly, UK transracially adopted adults search for information at a younger age than their white counterparts (25.8 years compared to 31.2 years), with ‘racial’ and ethnic identity issues featuring strong in their reasons for searching (Howe and Feast 2000). More UK transracial adoptees search for their (black) birth father, both initially

and subsequently, than white adoptees (Kirton et al. 2000). Some feel anxious or ambivalent about searching for their white birth family for fear of being rejected because they are black (Greenwood and Forster undated). Further, they are more likely to feel different from their adoptive families, less likely to feel they “belonged”, or to feel ‘at home’ with their birth relatives than their white counterparts, or to have had their ‘racial’ and ethnic identity needs met following reunion (Howe and Feast 2000; Kirton et al. 2000; Triseliotis et al. 2005). Similarly, USA research has found transracial adoptees search for black kinship and community as adults (Samuels 2009, 2010). Writing by UK transracial adoptees of both historical (Harris 2006, 2010) and contemporary adoptions (Harris 2008) provides further insight highlighting amongst adults the salience of race throughout their childhoods and the lifelong impact of transracial adoption as they search for birth family, community of origin and a sense of belonging as adults, and among children, feelings of loss alongside the positive difference adoption has made to their lives.

Methodology

This paper draws upon findings drawn from a larger study of service users’ views and experiences, funded by the West Midlands Post Adoption Service (WMPAS) (now After Adoption) and the University of Warwick. The larger mixed method study (Bryman 1988) sought to answer several questions about the work of a post adoption agency: Who are its actual and potential users and beneficiaries?; What services do this diversity of groups expect to receive?; What do they actually receive?; What are the outcomes of this receipt of services?

Methods

Findings from the overall study are published (Harris 2004) and are based on an analysis of initial enquiries and support group users; a postal survey of 36 service users who had attended a WMPAS support group; in-depth individual interviews with 41 WMPAS users; and a piece of specially designed work with an adopted child and past WMPAS user. To address several areas of under-representation in the sample, a black birth relatives’ focus group and a lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) focus group, were held with non-WMPAS service users and publicised through individuals and agencies in the adoption and LGB communities. The findings from the black birth relatives’ focus group have been reported (Harris 2005).

While quantitative methods were suited to analysing who WMPAS service users are, qualitative methods were chosen due to their suitability for charting the perceptions, experiences and perspectives of participants (May 2003). Focus groups were employed because people may be more likely to share personal experiences (Morgan and Krueger 1993) and feel supported (Hoppe et al. 1995) in a group setting, and they have been used in research with lesbians (Farquhar and Das 1999).

Purposive sampling (May 2003) ensured the involvement of a broad range of adoption participants, particularly those who are largely missing from the research literature. Sixty-six people participated in the larger study. Twelve were domestic transracially adopted adults and it is this group this article focuses on; 7 were interviewed and 5 attended the LGB focus group; 6 were female and 6 male. Their age range was 19 to 33 years (interviewees) and 25 to 44 years (focus group participants); all resided in England.

Data Collection

Research participants took part in a semi-structured interview or focus group. Semi-structured interviews took place in the participants' home between 2000 and 2001, each taking several hours. Areas covered included how they learned about WMPAS; how, when, and why they contacted WMPAS; their post-adoption service needs; the services received and views about them; and how, if at all, receiving these services had made a difference to their life. The LGB focus group was held in London in 2001. Aimed at non-WMPAS users, it focused on what participants would want from a post-adoption service, their experience of any services used, and making post-adoption services receptive and responsive to their specific needs. The interviews and focus group were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Analysis

The transcripts and completed surveys were coded manually on a thematic basis. The codes were generated from the research questions and from the users' responses and conversations, using a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1990). New categories were added as they arose. Coding allowed comparison between interviewees who had been allocated the same code and provided an overview of all the interviews.

Ethical issues

There were particular ethical challenges because adoption is a sensitive topic (Renzetti and Lee 1993) involving hidden populations. Written consent was obtained in advance, and participants given an opportunity to ask questions and withdraw their

consent at any stage. Confidentiality was limited by the potential need to share any disclosure of risk or harm to the research participant or others. Written guidelines were developed with WMPAS for responding to any disclosure. Individual debriefing included providing a post-adoption resources handout. Where abuse or neglect had been disclosed, I discussed any current risk to children and emotional support for the adoptee. Disclosures were shared with my academic supervisor. No one considered there were any children currently at risk from the alleged perpetrators. Where suicidal feelings were mentioned I assessed whether the adoptee was a risk to him/herself and explored whether s/he had adequate support. In all instances, the guidelines were followed. Research participants were asked to provide a pseudonym.

Study Limitations

This study did not have the adoption support needs of transracially adopted adults as its primary focus. I am reporting what a sub-sample of research participants told me. I had no reason to disbelieve them; the data was compelling. Although the numbers are small and it is not possible to know how representative they are of transracially adopted adults as a group, these voices are important. Indeed, service users have questioned ‘the idea that how “representative” they are affects the validity of what they say’ (Beresford and Campbell 1994 p319). Significantly, as the participants’ childhood experiences relate to a different era, they do not tell us about the experiences of contemporary transracially adopted children who are more likely to have birth family contact and be raised in a racially and culturally diverse community or what their support needs may be.

The findings are drawn from data from a small number of transracially adopted adults

and, therefore, may not be generalisable. These adopted adults joined their respective adoptive family in the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s. They are of a previous generation when professional thinking about adoption was very different, as was British society. Adoption was seen as a solution rather than a lifelong journey, adoptive parents received little or no preparation and training, and there was almost no recognition of identity issues for adoptees, let alone racial and cultural identity for black and minority ethnic adoptees, or of the need for adoption support services. As the data was collected over a decade ago, it reflects participants’ experiences of adoption support services at the time they received them. It does not necessarily tell us about adoption support services today.

Research with a larger sample of transracially adoptees would provide a more complete picture of their adoption support needs. Further, this study does not tell us about the adoption support experiences and needs of younger transracially adopted adults from contemporary placements. Given the absence of UK research on the adoption support needs of transracially adopted adults, the perspectives of the adoptees in this study are relevant, highlighting key issues and questions for practitioners to consider in both the placement of children and the provision of adoption support services.

Findings

Two key themes emerged from the data analysis: positive experiences of post-adoption services and gaps in service provision regarding the impact of childhood experiences (racism(s), language and culture, abuse, disruption), and adult

experiences (meeting another transracially adopted person, managing post-reunion relationships, counselling and psychotherapy, emotional distress, support groups, choice of worker). These are now presented and supported by use of illustrative representative quotations and relevant literature. Interview participants are identified by pseudonym and age; focus group participants by pseudonym and sexuality.

Positive experiences of service

Some respondents explained how post-adoption services could make a positive difference to their lives, on emotional, practical and social levels. These included increased levels of personal affirmation and emotional health. The information and knowledge provided by services tended to improve their understanding of significant relationships and available supports. For transracial adoptees the difference to feelings about self, could help to change complex feelings of shame about being black or minority ethnic; it could also help reframe the adoption story and the role (or exclusion) of black birth fathers in the adoption ‘decision’:

You know, I started to feel not ashamed of who I was because, for many years when I was growing up, I felt ashamed that my father was Black. I felt ashamed that my mother’s family were from Ireland...but I’ve started to like myself a bit more,... I can understand more about me, where I came from, and that my dad wasn’t the ogre he was painted to be, that he was actually quite a decent bloke.

(Sarah, age 31)

A number of respondents felt that the lack of resemblance between themselves and their adoptive family compounded their sense of ‘racial’ difference (Kirton et al.

2000; Harris 2006; Patel 2009; Samuels 2009). This was exacerbated by living in a predominantly white community, although seeing someone one resembled could impact positively on self-identity:

Well, in the fact that I think I look like my mum a bit [laughter]. I sort of know where I come from.

(Rashpal, age 31)

Receiving a service could lead to establishing contact with long lost birth relatives, including siblings, or viewing tracing more positively:

Well, I mean, it's made a big difference, isn't it, because I met my [birth] mum, my family. I've got two families now.

(Rashpal, age 31)

It made me realise it [tracing] won't be so difficult now, I won't be unaided...

(Inderjit, age 33)

Gaps in service provision

The transracially adoptees identified a number of support needs that had not been met by existing adoption support services. These often related to unmet needs in childhood and their continued impact in adulthood.

Racism(s) in childhood

Most of those interviewed spoke about racism during their childhood, experienced in both community and family contexts, a finding mirrored in other studies, although overt racism by adopters is apparently uncommon (Kirton 2000; Kirton et al. 2000).

Some talked about negative experiences in the educational system:

...me and my brother were the only two Indians in that area, so we had a lot of racism at school, people picking on us at school and stuff, ...

I felt like I owed my parents, you know. I had to be good because I owed them because they rescued me and like, took me home...My bother had a lot of stick when he went to the comprehensive school, like knives and all sorts... (Rashpal, age 31)

Rashpal's gratitude towards his adoptive parents is reflected in adoptees' own writings (Harris 2003, 2006) and is connected to the idea of being 'rescued' by adoptive parents, a notion widespread in adoption, particularly transnational adoption (Selman 2011). Services might then usefully provide opportunities for adoptees to articulate these perceptions and experiences, and their impact upon individuals and families. Services should recognise the prevalence of racism during childhood and provide an opportunity to talk about any racism experienced, including from adoptive parents:

just acknowledging and, I suppose, discussion, in a way, of things that you grew up with, you know, racism and the prejudice you might have had from your parents...

(Sarah, age 31)

Language and culture

Rashpal spoke about how as a child and adult he had not had the opportunity to socialise with Indian people:

I've never really mixed with Indian people before. I never like had the chance to mix, you know, what I mean? Learn about the culture and see how strict some things are, and how much *roti* you're allowed to eat (laughter).

This had implications for establishing contact with his birth family. He would have appreciated background knowledge on Indian families and culture, particularly social etiquette, prior to establishing contact with his birth mother:

It's just a bit of background knowledge about how the family works in an Indian, you know what I mean? What you can do and what you cannot say. I've made a few slip-ups (laughter).

(Rashpal, age 31)

Michael also described as a child being unable to understand the accent of his African-Caribbean friend's Dad:

...when I was younger and the Dad's talking to me and I'm going, 'What did he say?'...and he's talking to me like I should understand him and I think, 'What d'you say?'...

(Michael, age 24)

This lack of familiarity with birth family/community culture, language and accent can impact on post-reunion processes. For example, Craig described being unable to understand a lot of what his birth father had said to him. Rashpal’s worker had asked him if he spoke Punjabi, saying his mother may speak little English, although this was not the case. This deficit of cultural knowledge and linguistic skills can have a negative impact upon post-reunion relationships:

...., they [birth family] are always speaking in Punjabi, you know, the parents and that, and like I don’t. You feel excluded and you don’t know what’s going on...

(Rashpal, age 31)

These findings highlight the long-term impact of placing children with white adoptive families who are unable to provide children with a ‘bicultural social development’ through ‘cultural immersion experiences’ (Samuels 2010 p39) within the adoptee’s community(ies) of origin. Further, they raise important questions about the role of adoption support services, which, in addition to a diverse staff team, might usefully have links to community workers and groups.

Meeting another transracially adopted adult

Some respondents explained how they would have liked the opportunity to meet and talk with another transracially adopted adult. A strong sense of isolation and the support of meeting with others has been found in research (Kirton 2000), practice (Shekleton 1990; Mallows 1999) and in personal accounts by transracially adopted adults (Burnell et al. 1993; Dewan 2003; Harris 2006). For example, Rashpal would

have liked to talk to another transracial adoptee about what to expect when establishing contact with his Indian birth mother:

[you] could talk to and find out, like, and things, and they could say, ‘Well, this might happen, or this might happen, or that might happen, or watch out for this’...

(Rashpal, age 31)

While such opportunities could be provided by adoption support agencies and regional adoption consortiums through buddying schemes, workshops and support groups (Shekleton 1990), alternatives include signposting and supporting adults to access adult transracial adoptee run group support and online national and international adoptee communities.

Managing post-reunion relationships

Rashpal was also having to cope with some birth relatives not being aware of his identity. He spoke of concealing who he is when in-laws and friends visit his birth family:

...so I am still like a secret, you know what I mean? It might be nice like, you know, the shop opposite my brother’s shoe shop, a young woman asked me, ‘Is that your mum that works over there?’, and I had to say, ‘No’... It would have been nice to say, ‘Yeah’.

(Rashpal, age 31)

Agencies could usefully provide opportunities for adoptees to explore their expectations of renewed contact pre-reunion, their experience post-reunion, feelings of grief and cultural loss heightened by the contact and how to negotiate post-reunion relationships. Similarly, support for birth relatives could provide an opportunity to

explore the experience of losing a child/ren to adoption including their grief and hopes for their child, how being a birth mother/father is viewed within the community, the impact of renewed contact on self and the family, negotiating post-reunion relationships and strategies for introducing the adoptee within the family and wider community.

Counselling and psychotherapy

Several of the transracial adoptees who attended the LGB focus group reported negative experiences of white counsellors and therapists and more positive experiences with black and Asian counsellors and therapists:

...[I saw a] counsellor at my university. There were a lot of adoption issues and she didn't understand the adoption issues. She didn't understand the sexuality issues. She didn't understand the ethnicity issues and then I came to the [post-adoption service] and got a gay [male] counsellor...at that point I found out that I was also conceived through rape and he couldn't understand the issues for me as a woman talking about those things. And he said he didn't understand the ethnicity issues...

(Meena, lesbian)

I [have] just about completed about two years of once a week therapy and, because I had a black therapist...I think it has made an enormous difference...that person has very much come from a place of, you know, starting with my experience of racism and my internalised

racism... I have had six years prior to that of psychotherapy with a white psychotherapist, white male psychotherapist, who not only could not address my issues of racism or internalised racism but also couldn't address my issues of sexuality...

(Sunita, bisexual)

These transracial adoptees wanted counsellors versed in adoption, LGB and 'race' issues. One participant suggested transracial adoptees should provide training for workers, reflecting the increasing involvement of users in the education and training of social workers (Levin 2004).

The 'racialised gender and class politics' (Patton 2000 p17) in transracial adoption were reflected in Phillip's concern with class and identity, an issue he had received counselling from WMPAS about:

Class. That was the real issue because I went from, I thought I was thinking to myself that I'm having this real advantage because...I shouldn't be living where [I am] or going to the school I'm going to. I should be like just not having the things I've got now.

...it was very much a working-class birth family to a very middle-class, middle-class upwards, you know, family. So, I kind of felt that, that was about identity. I felt that I didn't belong in...that segment. That was because I was mixed, mixed up.

(Phillip, age 19)

The need for counselling for birth and adoptive family members was highlighted by Rashpal. He felt that his reunion had been particularly upsetting for his adoptive mother:

...I mean, my birth mum didn't have any counselling, you know, so there should be counselling for both sets of parents, particularly for the adoptive parents.

(Rashpal, age 31)

Emotional distress

Five out of twelve transracial adoptees spoke about experiencing emotional distress ranging from panic attacks about their racial identity, through to making use of counselling, psychotherapy and support groups, and becoming formal users (and survivors) of the psychiatric system. Another person spoke about recent suicidal feelings. This experience of emotional distress can be understood by thinking about the process of assimilation, of which transracial adoption is an extreme example. According to bell hooks (1989), black people are subjected to the logic of assimilation which has psychological consequences:

Embedded in this logic of assimilation is the white supremacist assumption that blackness must be eradicated so that a new self, in this case a “white” self, can come into being. Of course, since we who are black can never be white, this very effort promotes and fosters serious psychological stress and even severe mental illness (p67).

Mental health service users who use adoption support services may have specific concerns, such as, to explore how a search and possible reunion may impact on them, and to discuss strategies for maintaining positive emotional health:

Yes, how [the reunion] might have affected me, you know. What was the best way to safeguard my health like, how much to get involved, you know.

(Rashpal, age 31)

Abuse

Significantly, four out of five transracial adoptees who attended the LGB focus group and one transracial adoptee who was interviewed, volunteered information about sexual, physical or emotional abuse or neglect experienced within their adoptive family. Their disclosures included: physical abuse by one or both adoptive parents (3), physical and sexual abuse by adopters and sexual abuse by male adoptive siblings (1), and physical and emotional abuse and neglect by adoptive parents (1). In addition, another transracially adopted adult who was interviewed appeared to suggest sexual abuse by her adoptive father.

Roz, a focus group participant, highlighted two key issues. She felt white adoptive parents may be shielded from child protection authorities because of perception of social status or an inherent disbelief among practitioners that abuse may be occurring. She suggested this sense of unfair protection was compounded by the accolades that accompany adopting a black child. This she contrasted sharply with the lack of protection that was afforded to her:

...I can identify in terms of [my] own parents – white, middle class, university graduates – and they could do nothing wrong because they [social services] couldn't see past this white thing in the first place, and then a white family adopting a Black child sometimes gets them ten tickets to heaven...so then the abuse going on in terms of physical and sexual abuse I experienced...there's just not a hope in hell that it is going to be seen...

(Roz, bisexual)

Her's appeared to be a racialised experience of abuse and further highlighted the silencing of transracially adopted adults by practitioners that can take place. Roz had felt silenced by a social worker regarding her experience of transracial adoption, which, in turn, prevented her from disclosing the abuse:

...the woman asked me about my experience of adoption. I sort of said to her that it was bad, all my adoptive family are white, I have got five brothers as well and, she asked me how it was. I said, 'Well, it wasn't very successful'...I didn't say anything more than that but then the woman responded – she was a white woman – and she responded by defending my adoptive parents saying how hard it was to be a white adoptive parent of a black child, and minimising what I was saying...And I am thinking, 'Well, I haven't said anything, you don't even know all the nature of the stuff...'

(Roz, bisexual)

Such disclosures raise the question of how widespread abuse and neglect of black children by white adoptive families may have been in historical placements (Harris 2014). It also suggests adoption support services need to provide the space for adoptees to disclose, if they wish to do so. It implies that agencies should deliver services tailored to meeting the specific support needs of those adoptees who have been abused within their adoptive family. As Roz pointed out, she used support services not to address her experience of transracial adoption but her experience of abuse.

Disruption

Cal and Michael’s experiences of being ‘thrown out’ of their adoptive families when they were each sixteen years old highlight the need for support services throughout childhood and, particularly, following a formal or informal disruption. Both had become homeless. When Michael went to social services for help he received none, leading to rough sleeping and a decline in his health and social well-being:

[I] never felt like I was treated the same at all and the colour didn’t help because obviously I knew I was not the same. I moved out and it all carried on, it all went pear shaped, there were rows all the time. I finally moved out at 16 – well, she [adoptive mother] chucked me out...When I first left...I went off the rails completely...I was doing drugs, I was doing crime and all sorts and, because of that, I’ve been to prison...

He spoke about depression and past suicidal feelings relating to his adoption. His experience highlights the importance of adoption support for adoptive families, and for all children to know who to turn to if they are experiencing family difficulties, neglect or abuse. His experience further underlines the importance of making placements with adults who understand the issues involved in adoptive parenting, who can meet their child’s needs and who will seek professional support when difficulties arise.

Support groups

There were no black and minority ethnic service users attending the WMPAS Adopted Adults Support Group at the time the study was undertaken. Some transracially adopted adults have spoken in research (Kirton 2000), and in their own writing (Dewan 2003; Harris 2003, 2006, 2012), about the importance of meeting others. The current study sought to know whether transracially adopted adults using WMPAS might identify a specific support group service. Five out of seven interviewed said they would attend a support group for transracial adoptees. One person was unsure, and another said no, due to family commitments. A number of ideas emerged, often reflecting other service users’ experiences and research findings (Mullender and Ward 1991; The members of Women First 2002). They included: helping others; sharing experiences, strategies and difficulties; reducing isolation; and receiving the empathy, support and understanding of other transracial adoptees:

I would go to a session because I think it may help other people who do need one...

...to talk to people who are in the same situation, have grown up with white families, that have had the same problems that I've had with both Black and white 'races', you know...that you're not on your own...I could tell people how I've got over it and it might help them.

(Michael, age 24)

I would use it...just to find out how other people are, you know, to see if I could learn something, how to cope, or how they feel or, you know, if there's any problems...

(Rashpal, age 31)

I think it's more empathy and understanding of people who've been in similar situations, and...that you can say something without really having to explain because other people know how you feel...

(Sarah, age 31)

Michael suggested that WMPAS should also hold groups for transracially adopted children to learn about Black and minority ethnic history and culture:

...if I was not the sort of person I am, I wouldn't know nothing about my background...West Indian...So something like that would be something cultural...something cultural. I feel at home when I'm around Black people...so something in that way would be good.

(Michael, age 24)

Such an initiative would need to recognise that culture is not fixed but fluid, flexible and constantly evolving, and to compliment ‘cultural immersion experiences’ (Samuels 2010 p39) provided by the adoptive family and not replace opportunities to experience and learn about the culture first hand and to build relationships to foster positive racial and cultural identity development.

Black and minority ethnic workers

Although most of those interviewed (six out of seven) would not have wanted a black or minority ethnic worker, a finding that is not surprising given that transracial adoptees tend to be raised ‘white’ (Gill and Jackson 1983; Kirton 2000) and often report feeling uncomfortable around black people (Kirton et al. 2000), Rashpal did say that he would have liked an Indian worker both when contacting the agency and in the future:

...if I went back to WMPAS it would be only if I got problems and I feel they would understand more about the [birth] family than what an English person could...they could be more helpful, be able to offer me some advice...I think it would be nice to talk to an Indian worker...

(Rashpal, age 31)

Some others expressed a degree of ambivalence. Meena, for example, had lacked confidence in her white male worker’s ability to relate to her Indian birth mother:

I didn’t feel happy about him being a white man talking to my birth mother who was an Asian woman because I didn’t feel he understood

the issues she might be going through [and] I didn't know if she would be comfortable talking to him...

(Meena, lesbian, focus group)

Michael did not want a Black worker yet commented:

...it would have been nice to be offered [a Black worker] because there may be others, yes, who find it easier. It's like, I find it easy talking to you than I may a white person which is strange...I just find it easier...

(Michael, age 24)

This suggests the need for adoption support services to have a diverse team of practitioners and counsellors so that transracial adoptees may have a choice of worker.

Discussion

We do not know how many transracial adoptees use statutory or independent adoption support services including accessing their birth records. Yet, adoption support services have the potential to transform service users' lives (Harris 2004). Those transracially adopted adults who had received services identified the positive difference these had made to their life including: to feelings about self and racial identity, how they viewed their black birth father or tracing, and establishing contact with birth family. They also identified needs arising from their childhood experiences that had been unmet by existing provision, for example, the opportunity as adults to voice and explore childhood and adult experiences of racism within the adoptive

family and wider community, and perceptions of gratitude and indebtedness to adoptive parents. This, in part, mirrors the findings of another regional post-adoption agency which found transracial adoptees experience racism within the adoptive family, have feelings of ‘anger, sadness and bewilderment’, and struggle with a ‘negative self-image’ (Sawbridge 1998 p241). Significantly, this study identifies issues and experiences transracial adoptees could usefully explore in a tailored support group or workshop and/or through individual support. For example, experiences of racism or multiracisms in family and community contexts, (mono)cultural upbringing, emerging post-reunion relationships, and maintaining emotional health during the search and reunion process.

The study found transracial adoptees may want to meet and share experiences with another transracially adopted adult; and to attend a tailored support group. One UK agency took a group of teenage transracial adoptees away for a weekend and found they valued talking with each other (Mallows 1989). Practitioners (Sheckleton 1990; Hayes 1996a, 1996b) have highlighted the importance of support groups for transracial adoptees with the Post Adoption Centre, in 1988, being the first UK agency to provide a service specifically for transracially adopted adults, in a series of groups with black facilitators (Sheckleton 1990; Dagoo undated). Since then, several English Adoption Support Agencies have established support groups for transracially adopted adults, while the England-based service-user run Transnational and Transracial Adoption Group, with the Intercountry Adoption Centre, provides workshops for adoptees whose search for information and/or birth family has an international element. Regional adoption consortiums offer the opportunity to develop services for transracially adopted adults at a local level, pooling resources, skills and

knowledge, while signposting to online national and international transracial adoptee communities and local and national transracial adoptee-run groups opens up further avenues for support and the sharing of experiences.

The complex issues transracial adoptees encounter when developing birth family relationships, together with the research finding that reunion with birth relatives may not meet transracial adoptee’s identity needs (Kirton et al. 2000), though racial and ethnic identity feature strongly in motivation for searching (Sawbridge 1998; Kirton et al. 2000; Samuels 2010), suggests counselling pre- and post-reunion might explore family relationships and identity concerns and help transracial adoptees to find other ways to think about and consolidate their sense of self. Crucially, the intersection of oppressions in the context of transracial adoption, suggests counsellors and psychotherapists should be skilled in race, adoption, LGB and class issues. Further, the findings suggest the need for a proactive counselling service for birth and adoptive family members.

This study suggests the adoption support needs of transracial adoptees are complex and multi-layered. Adoption support agencies will need to think carefully about how to meet them. Further, rather than assume adoption will lead transracial adoptees to seek support, agencies should recognise adoptees may seek support specifically regarding abuse and neglect within the adoptive family, an experience which may be more common in historical adoptions than hitherto acknowledged. Currently, there is not one comprehensive adoption support system in the UK tailored to meeting the needs of this group of children and adults. The failure to provide appropriate services

for transracial adoptees and their birth relatives may be viewed as institutional racism (MacPherson 1993).

Finally, the study raises some important considerations for the assessment of prospective adoptive parents. These include the ability and commitment to provide the child with ‘cultural immersion experiences’ (Samuels 2010 p39) within the community(ies) of origin so that the adoptee feels comfortable in the white community and community(ies) of origin, equipped with the cultural and linguistic knowledge and skills to ‘fit in’. Given the salience of race and racism reported, practitioners might usefully draw upon research identifying the conditions that support the development of racial literacy among white mothers, that is, the ability to equip children with the ‘conceptual tools and practices to counter everyday racism’ (Winddance Twine 2012 p28).

Conclusion

The findings confirm those of other English studies, namely the centrality of racism in childhood and questions of racial and cultural identity and belonging in adulthood (Kirton 2000; Kirton et al. 2000; Patel 2009). This study goes one step further by asking transracial adoptees about their experience of using adoption support services. Their responses suggest the experience of adoption can create emotional pain for transracial adoptees, coupled with feelings of displacement and being an outsider within the adoptive family, wider community and black or minority ethnic birth family. The findings highlight fundamental difficulties experienced both during childhood and adulthood and identify some adoption support needs of this group.

Arguably, the difficulties reported pull into question the notion that ‘love is enough’ and a colour-blind approach to parenting at a time when legislation has removed the requirement to consider race, culture, religion and language when making an adoptive placement. It is important that we recognise that all adopters of black and minority ethnic children will need careful preparation, assessment, training and ongoing support; to be racially literate and to provide an upbringing that reflects the child’s cultural and linguistic heritage(s). A comprehensive range of adoption support services tailored to the needs of transracially adopted children and adults, their birth and adoptive parents is needed. Finally, there remains an urgent need for research into the lifelong adoption experiences of UK transracially adoptees, what specific support needs they have beyond those reported by white adoptees and what works for them in adoption support.

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