CROSS-CULTURAL ADOPTION IN SOUTH AFRICA: NEW DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the literature on cross-cultural adoption in South Africa and provides new insights and research questions to help social work practitioners and researchers better understand the impact of cross-cultural adoption for adoptees. The article compares the context of race and adoption research in the United States and South Africa, paying particular attention to strengths and limitations of research studies from both countries. In this paper, I argue that race and racism shape the experiences of black cross-cultural adoptees, and therefore adoptees' ability to navigate such circumstances should be a central focus when assessing the impact of cross-cultural adoption. While much research from both countries has focused on the experiences and perspectives of parents and social workers, future research should focus on the adoptee perspective. Practical implications for those involved in social work practice and social services in the South African context are also addressed.

INTRODUCTION

Adoption across races, which in practice often takes the form of adoption of black children by white parents, has been a contentious issue in both the United States and South Africa. Questions and commentaries centreing on the ability of white parents to raise children of African descent and the destiny of these children should white parents not be allowed to adopt them have fuelled the last 40 years of debates about cross-cultural adoptions in the United States. Such debates have been thrust into mainstream conversations due to the vast attention to high profile cases of celebrities in the United States such as Angelina Jolie, Madonna, and Sandra Bullock adopting black children. In South Africa, only recently has cross-cultural adoption of black children by white parents been allowed due to the recency of apartheid, bringing about questions of whether or not such adoptions are appropriate and how to best support children in cross-cultural contexts.

Both the United States and South Africa have seen significant changes that have impacted the practice of transracial adoption. Currently, in the United States transracial adoptions are governed by the Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA-IEP, PL 104-188, 1996), which prohibits the delay or denial of a child's placement on the basis of race, colour, or national origin. In South Africa, the Child Care Amendment Act of 1991 opened the doors to cross-cultural adoptions by amending the clause that stated that adoptees *must* be placed with parents of the same race. While legislative frameworks and attitudes of South Africans have been found to be generally positive towards cross-cultural adoption (Hall, 2010; Ferreira, 2009; Moos and Mwaba, 2007), current policy and practice in South Africa still prioritises adoption of children within similar racial and ethnic communities. The recently implemented Children's Act of 2005, which came into effect in April 2010, states, "In the assessment of a prospective adoptive parent, an adoption social worker may take the cultural and community diversity of the adoptable child and prospective adoptive parent into consideration" (Section 231(3)). Such policies are aligned with article 20(3) of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) which states that, in relation to children who need to be placed in adoption or other forms of care, "due regard shall be paid to the desirability of continuity in a child's upbringing and to the child's ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background."

In both the United States and South Africa, black children are over-represented in the adoption system while black potential adopters are under-represented (Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), 2011; Smith, McRoy, Freundlich and Kroll, 2008). Children become orphaned or end up in

the child welfare system for a number of reasons including child abandonment, the voluntary giving up of children for adoption by their biological parents, and court-ordered termination of the parental responsibilities and rights of biological parents. In South Africa, the prevalence of HIV and AIDS, as well as other fatal diseases in black communities have contributed significantly to increasing number of orphaned children in black communities (Roby and Shaw, 2006; Schroeder and Nichola, 2006). As of 2009, it was estimated that 'AIDS orphans' made up 56% of the total orphaned children population in South Africa (UNICEF/UNAIDS, 2010). While historically there has been a focus on kinship care and informal family care within black communities, the increasing number of orphans due to HIV and AIDS and related diseases makes this system difficult to maintain, resulting in more black children ending up in the child welfare system (Freeman and Nkomo, 2006). While most adoptions in the United States and South Africa remain same race (HSRC, 2011; Roby and Shaw, 2006), this disparity between the racial demographics of children for adoption and those seeking to adopt will lead to the continued, and perhaps increased, practice of cross-cultural adoption in South Africa.

While adoptions of black children by white parents remain a reality in both countries, there has been much debate about the appropriateness of such placements. Numerous studies on the outcomes for transracially adopted children and their families have been conducted in the United States and have yielded conflicting findings. Some studies conclude that such adoptees are just as well adjusted as adopted children placed with parents of the same race, while other studies have found that transracially adopted individuals have more developmental and adjustment difficulties than same-race adoptees. Less is known, however, about the experiences of cross-cultural adoptees in South Africa, particularly around issues of development and adjustment.

The purpose of this paper is to review the literature on cross-cultural adoption in South Africa and provide new insights and research questions to help social work practitioners and researchers better understand the impact of cross-cultural adoption for adoptees in South Africa. In this paper I compare the context of race and adoption research in the United States and South Africa, paying particular attention to strengths and limitations of research studies from both countries. Ultimately, I argue that race and racism continually shape the experiences of black cross-cultural adoptees and therefore adoptees' ability to navigate such circumstances should be a central focus when assessing the impact of cross-cultural adoption. Furthermore, I argue that the adoptee voice should be central to this assessment.

THE CONTINUED SIGNIFICANCE OF RACE AND RACISM

Although many South Africans are cautions or reluctant to bring up issues of race, particularly if such topics tarnish the non-racialism approach touted in the 'rainbow nation', issues of race and racism are alive and well. Like the United States, South Africa has a long history of segregation. While formally laws, policies, and practices endorsing segregation and apartheid have been ruled unconstitutional, the remnants of these racially segregated pasts still impact the present day experiences of people of colour. This is particularly true in South Africa, where the relatively recent abolishment of apartheid has left significant intersections between race and class disparities. Segregation between black and white people is still very prominent in South Africa even though interracial contact has increased since the end of apartheid (Finchilescu, Tredoux, Mynhardt, Pillay and Muianga, 2007; Dixon, Tredoux and Clack, 2005). Black people in South Africa are still very much a stigmatised group who regularly encounter discrimination and oppression based on race (Williams, Gonzalez, Williams, Mohammed, Moomal and Stein, 2008). Additionally, scholars have noted that that while overt racism and discrimination may be less apparent, modern day forms of racism take a more subtle and covert approach (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Robus and Macleod, 2006; Dovidio, 2001; Pierce, 1995; Duckitt, 1991; Essed, 1991).

Discrimination and exclusion based on race has been found to have significant negative psychosocial and psycho-educational impacts on the well-being of people of colour. Research has documented the negative implications of racism-related stress including mental health concerns such as low self-esteem, depression, hopelessness, poor academic performance, and risky behaviour (Williams et al., 2008; Carter, 2007; Williams, Neighbors and Jackson, 2003; Carroll, 1998; Steele, 1997; Pierce, 1995). Scholars have pointed out that learning to navigate in the context of racism is a necessary developmental process for people of colour (Spencer, Dupree, and Hartman, 1997; García-Coll, Lamberty, Jenkins, McAdoo, Crnic, Wasik and Vázquez García, 1996). In order to develop a positive sense of self-identity and strategies to cope with racism, a skill I refer to as racial competency, it is essential for people to be taught about the realities of race and racism and provided the social supports to help them cope with such experiences (Bentley, Adams and Stevenson, 2009; Stevenson, 1994).

Being adopted by a white family does not shield black cross-cultural adoptees from racism and discrimination. In contrast, it may exacerbate their experiences and make them even more susceptible to other forms of exclusion and discrimination such as racism within the family (Snyder,

2011; Samuels, 2009), particularly if extended families members are not 'on-board' with the adoption of a child from a different race. If adoptees have lived in relative shelter from other black communities, and live in a predominantly white context in terms of neighbourhood and school, they may experience exclusion from black communities as they grow up due to their lack of knowledge regarding cultural norms (Snyder, 2011; Samuels, 2010). Additionally, while family and community are often a means people of colour use to find solace and cope with racially salient events (Utsey, Giesbrecht, Hook and Stanard, 2008; Thompson Sanders, 2006; Shorter-Gooden, 2004), cross-culturally raised individuals may have more difficulty finding supportive, positive social supports to cope with racism and identity issues. While many argue that interracial adoption is a way to ease racial tensions and facilitate the multiculturally inclusive, colour-blind society of the 'New South Africa', until such utopia is achieved, society will see black cross-cultural adoptees as black people, making them vulnerable to the same racism and discrimination as non-adopted black people. Thus, scholars have noted that a key life skill for transracially adopted children is the ability to cope with discrimination (Smith et al., 2008).

THE CONTEXT AND STATUS OF CROSS-CULTURAL ADOPTION RESEARCH

Transracial adoption research in the United States

In the United States, transracial adoption is generally defined as occurring when a child's race or ethnicity is different than that of the adoptive parents, or parent in the case of a single parent. The research on transracial adoption arose from the debates about race 'matching' and the developmental needs of children of colour. The most contentious debates revolve around the adoption of black children by white parents. While the debate is framed as concerned with the best interests of the children, it is also an ideological debate about colour-conscious versus colour-blind approaches to policy. Opponents of transracial adoption take a colour-conscious approach by centreing the significance of race and questioning the ability of white parents to help black children develop a positive sense of racial identity and the skills necessary to cope with prejudice and discrimination (Lovett-Tisdale and Purnell, 1996; Taylor and Thornton, 1996; Perry, 1994; National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW), 1992). Proponents take a colour-blind approach and argue that considering race slows the path to adoption which poses risks resulting from long-term foster care by precluding eligible white families from adopting them (Bartholet, 1999; Banks, 1998; Barth, 1997; Kennedy, 1995). Thus, the goal of the initial research agenda was to provide

information about the outcomes of adoptees in order to inform policy debate and decision-making.

A great deal of research on transracial adoption has been qualitative and longitudinal in nature (Simon and Alstien, 2002; Patton, 2000; McRoy and Zurcher, 1983; Lander, 1977). However, a few of these studies have analysed qualitative interview data in a quantitative form as well (Grow and Shipiro, 1974). Some studies have employed quantitative analysis of secondary data (Feigelman, 2000; Brooks and Barth, 1999; Vroegh, 1997) to compare transracial black and same race adoptees. Most of the seminal research on transracial adoption has focused on the perspective or reports of white adoptive parents to assess the impact of transracial adoption on black adoptees. However, increasing amounts of research have begun to include the voices of transracial adoptees (Patton, 2000; Simon and Roorda, 2000) and many transracial adoptees themselves have come to conduct research on this population, voice their stories and perspectives, and engage critically with the literature that historically excluded them from the conversation (Samuels, 2009; Trenka, Oparah and Shin, 2006; Raible, 1990).

The varieties of methods, political agendas, and epistemologies used to assess the impacts of transracial adoption have led to inconsistent results regarding the effects of transracial adoption on black individuals. Qualitative narratives and methods have illuminated the complexities surrounding identity processes and family dynamics, while quantitative measures have allowed researchers to compare transracial adoptees to same race adoptees in terms of psychological adjustment (as measured by psychological tests) and academic performance. Often such inconsistencies in the findings arise because scholars are asking different types of questions and using different outcome measures to define 'success'. Additionally, most studies have not addressed the central concern of the opponents' position – the ability of black individuals to develop constructive means of navigating as a person of colour in a society fraught with racism – but rather situate this topic within the construct of racial identity, which is also a vague, often ill- defined concept in the literature. Thus, quantitative studies that assess psychological adjustment suggest that transracial adoptions have been 'successful' in comparison to same-race adoptions (Feigelman, 2000; Brooks and Barth, 1999), while some qualitative narrative studies challenge such definitions of 'success' as being based mostly on academic achievement and psychological testing, rather than aspects of development and adjustment such as experiences with racism and how individuals navigate racial differences within and beyond their families (Snyder, 2011; Samuels, 2009).

Cross-cultural adoption research in South Africa

In South Africa, adoption of children by parents of a different race is often referred to as 'cross-cultural' or 'cross-racial' adoption. Similar to the United States, most concerns about cross-cultural adoptions in South Africa involve white adoptive parents and black children. This can be partially explained through the findings that there are more white people than black people seeking to adopt and more black children awaiting adoption in the child welfare system (Hall, 2010; Szabo and Ritchken, 2002). While some scholars have attributed the low rate of adoption in black communities to black people being less willing to adopt, others have argued that race and class biases shape adoption placement decisions (Mosikatsana, 1997). A recent study by the HSRC (2011) included interviews with social service practitioners to gain insight into how social work practices and systems shape and inform national adoption trends and patterns. The HSRC interviews revealed prejudiced attitudes among some social workers towards particular groups of prospective adoptive parents including those who were not married, those with low income, and same-sex couples. These findings reiterate Mosikatsana's (1997) argument that adoption procedures and agency practices contained a class and racial bias in that social workers target mainly white middle class families as prospective adoptive parents. While not all practitioners hold such biases, some of these biases in the welfare system will make transracial adoption a potentially increasing practice due to the class inequalities between black and white potential adopters.

The arguments about the appropriateness of cross-cultural adoption in South Africa are similar to the arguments in the United States regarding transracial adoption – the benefits of transracial adoption (being in a stable family situation; bonding with a parent; etc.) outweigh the potentially negative developmental consequences of remaining in temporary or institutional care (Ferrier, 2009). Problematically, much of the theory and assumptions about the outcomes of cross-cultural adoption in South Africa is based on research about transracial adoption in the United States. Little research has focused on the nature, dynamics, or experiences of cross-cultural adoption in South Africa specifically. While the circumstances in South Africa may be similar to the United States in terms of race relations, there are significant differences due to poverty and HIV and AIDS. Such circumstances impact the cultural context under which children are adopted and their experiences with adoption. Hence, there is a need to understand cross-cultural adoption in South Africa in relation to its own unique context.

While there is an abundance of literature and resource guides available from adoption related organisations and numerous blogs and websites where adoptive parents have shared personal stories, perspectives, and opinions, there is very little empirical research on experiences and outcomes of cross-cultural adoption. Of the little there is, studies have focused on the opinions and experiences of parents and social service practitioners (HSRC, 2011; Finlay, 2006) and the perceptions of those not directly involved with cross-cultural adoption about their views (Hall, 2010; Moos and Mwaba, 2007). For example, Finlay (2006) conducted focus groups with parents who had cross-culturally adopted to explore challenges specific to cross-cultural adoption. Finlay found that parents attributed challenges experienced with cross-cultural adoption to a lack of support throughout the adoption process and concluded that a need exists for a comprehensive model of support for parents who cross-culturally adopt. Although Finlay's study was insightful in terms of parental experiences and support systems around cross-cultural adoption, its lack of focus on adoptee voices leaves a gap in knowledge around aspects that would help support the adoptees in their development from their own perspective. Hence, research focused on experiences and outcomes of adoptees could more comprehensively inform this model and shape supports for adoptive parents.

Focusing on perceptions of the practice of cross-cultural adoption, Moos and Mwaba (2007) surveyed psychology students at a predominantly 'coloured' institution in South Africa and found that students generally supported cross-cultural adoption and believed that such adoptions could help facilitate racial and ethnic tolerance. Additionally, Hall's (2010) qualitative focus group study with college students about racialised discourses and perceptions of cross-cultural adoption found that both black and white students focused on the 'best interests of the child,' but discussed those interests in different ways, that is, white students tended to endorse notions of colour-blindness and multiculturalism, while black students focused on preserving black identity and culture. Both studies support the notions that cross-cultural adoption is generally positive and a desirable alternative to long-term temporary care, however, Hall's study also illuminates the underlying tension between what actually is in the 'best interests of the child' – colour-blindness or racial consciousness. The voices of adoptees who have experienced different levels of racial socialisation from parents and community members would help illuminate potentially overlooked assumptions about the racial socialisation of cross-cultural adoptees as well as address the debate by offering insight into the outcomes of various socialisation approaches.

While there have been a few attempts to examine the experiences of adoptees, this line of research is still relatively underdeveloped in South Africa, particularly for cross-cultural adoptees. One study by Wrench (2008) focused on the experiences of adoptees, but did not include cross-cultural adoptees or adoptees of colour. Wrench conducted interviews with same race, white adult adoptees about their adoption experiences. While this study did not include cross-cultural adoptees, it offers much insight into the experiences of adoptees from their own perspective. Another thoughtful text by Kahn (2006), which focused on the experiences of adoption in South Africa, included narratives from both adoptive parents and adoptees. The stories shared in Kahn's text highlight both the positive and challenging sides of various types of adoption, including same-race and cross-cultural. Additionally, this text includes a resource guide for parents, which is valuable given that the audience is mostly prospective adoptive parents. However, Kahn's text also does not focus specifically on the experiences of cross-cultural adoptees.

The work of Wrench (2008) and Kahn (2006) is a step forward in understanding the experiences of adoptees in South Africa. However, more research is needed in order to provide a foundation from which to assess the experiences and adjustment of cross-cultural adoptees, specifically around their facility in navigating racialised contexts and developing a positive sense of racial identity within the unique social context of South Africa. The voices and perspectives of adoptees are essential in creating policy and practice to support adoptees throughout their development into adulthood. Hence, similar studies focusing specifically on the experiences of cross-cultural adoptees are necessary to help inform future policy and post-adoption support efforts for adoptees and parents.

NEW DIRECTIONS FOR SOUTH AFRICA: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTITIONERS AND RESEARCHERS

As this review has revealed, there are a number of limitations in the current literature that present opportunities for future research to more fully understand the experiences of and outcomes for cross-cultural adoptees in South Africa. Such research would provide social work practitioners and prospective adoptive parents with the information necessary to support adoptive families pre- and post-adoption.

First, as in the United States, most of the available literature regarding cross-cultural adoption in South African has focused on the needs and perspectives of the parents, particularly in mainstream media outlets such as websites and

blogs. While the United States has made some strides in understanding the experiences of transracial adoptees via the perspective of the adoptee, there is very little on the experience and outcomes of cross-cultural adoption from this perspective in South Africa, and even less that centre on the voices of adoptees themselves. Because of the unique social context in South Africa, social welfare practitioners and prospective parents should be cautious in applying findings of studies based in the United States to cross-cultural adoptees in South Africa. Race-based class differences, which are also present in the United States, are exacerbated in South Africa due to the remnants of the relatively recent apartheid-based system. Thus, South Africa has a unique opportunity to understand the intersection of class and race in the adoptee experience from the adoptee perspective.

Second, there is a large gap in the literature focusing on racial competency as an outcome of adjustment and development. Understandings of how cross-cultural adoptees learn to make sense of race, find support in dealing with racially charged incidents, and develop a positive sense of identity have yet to be fully understood. Like the research in the United States, the limited research that there has been in South Africa has not fully addressed concerns regarding the ability of white parents to provide black cross-cultural adoptees with the resources and supports needed to deal with racism and develop facility in navigating multiple racialised contexts. Given that crucial aspects of development for people of colour include their ability to navigate racialised contexts and develop a positive sense of racial identity, racial competency should be an outcome considered when assessing the impact of cross-cultural adoption on adoptees' development.

The voices and perspectives of cross-cultural adoptees in South Africa should be instrumental in designing programmes and policies to support their development and well-being. Understanding the ways in which cross-cultural adoptees experience and learn to cope with racism, and the impact such experiences have on their development, is of utmost importance in the highly racialised and still racially segregated South Africa. Such perspectives would be useful to prospective parents in illuminating aspects to consider when adopting cross-culturally and to current adoptive parents in supporting their children through their unique experiences. These voices will be of particular importance to social welfare professionals who work with adoptive families in designing support and training programmes to help facilitate the positive social, emotional, and cultural development of adoptees.

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