ASSOCIATIONS BETWEEN OPENNESS IN ADOPTION AND ADOPTEE LIFE SATISFACTION: A COMPARISON OF TRANSRACIAL AND SAME-RACE ADOPTIONS

by

WHITNEY WARTH

A THESIS

An Abstract of the Thesis of

Whitney Warth for the degree of Bachelor of Science
in the Department of Counseling Psychology and Human Services
to be taken June 2021

Title: Associations Between Openness in Adoption and Adoptee Life Satisfaction:
A Comparison of Transracial and Same-Race Adoptions

Approved: _____*Leslie Leve, Ph.D.*_____
Primary Thesis Advisor

While it is commonly presumed that adoption results in the formation of a loving family, it can also come with inherent losses to both the families and adoptees involved. In addition to a potential lack of knowledge about an adoptee's origins, the pairing of children and parents of different races, through transracial adoption, may add an additional layer of complexity.

Structural openness, or the communication between an adoptee and their birth parents, may be an avenue for adoptees to bridge gaps in their knowledge and forage connections with their past. The present research investigates the associations between the level of openness and life satisfaction for both transracial and same race adoptee adolescents from the Early Growth and Development Study.

From the current study, findings indicated that transracial and same race adoptees did not differ significantly in their level of openness, satisfaction with their adoption's openness, life satisfaction, or the strength of their family relationships. Despite this, the findings suggest that there may be a trend toward more openness in transracial adoptions being associated with higher adoptee life satisfaction and higher

satisfaction with their adoption's openness, in comparison to same race adoptees. The

present study aims to develop a deeper understanding of the effects of structural

openness, while providing insights about ways to support adoptees and their families in

coping with adoption related losses.

Acknowledgements

I would like to sincerely thank the members of my Thesis Committee, Dr. Leslie Leve, Dr. Camille Cioffi, and Professor Daniel Rosenberg for their generosity and willingness to guide me through this research project. I am forever thankful for their support, feedback, and encouragement throughout this entire process. Thank you to Sally Guyer, the EGDS assessment team, and all the adoptees and families whose participation made this research possible. I would like to also thank the faculty at the Clark Honors College and the University of Oregon who have guided me throughout my academic career. I extend another warm thank you to my family, friends, and the Adopted Students United who have supported me as I continue to develop my understanding of adoption, both personally and within broader contexts.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Background

Introduction to the History of Adoption in the US

Adoption is a way of establishing and growing a family and can take on a variety of different forms. There are many important contextual factors that make each adoption unique. These contextual factors may include: the age of an adoptee at the time of their adoption, whether the parents are single or a couple, the sexual orientation of the parents, whether relative or non-relatives are adopting, the environment and countries involved in the adoption, the racial and ethnic similarities of the family members, and the level of openness in the adoption. The current study is interested in how the factors of racial and ethnic identities and the level of openness in an adoption affect adopted adolescents.

When the practice of adoption began to be formalized in the United States in the 1850's, the "matching" philosophy was highly prominent (Herman, 2003). Conscious matching of children with adoptive families on the basis of appearance, religion, and other characteristics endured through most of the 1900's. This attitude surrounding adoption promoted the belief that adoption could be used as a tool to create families that appear to be just the same as those formed by biologic means. Thus, acknowledgement of differences between adoptees and their adoptive families was diminished, as was the role of the birth family in the child's future. This helps explain why historically, adoption typically involved cutting ties with biological family members. However, cultural shifts within the US over the past century have pressed for organizational policies that promote or require some level of contact between adoptive and birth families' post-adoption. Wider acceptance of practices, such as having children outside

of marriage and starting families using alternative ways, have lessened the stigma around adoption and expectations surrounding openness (Ge, 2008).

Constraints on the ability to place children through same-race adoption alone resulted in an increase in transracial adoptions. Transracial adoption may occur for adoptions both within the United States (domestic) and between the United States and other countries (international). Transracial adoption describes families with adoptive parents and children that have different races. This typically involves the pairing of White parents with non-White children. The first transracial adoption with a Black child and White parents was recorded in 1948 (Herman, 2003) and currently over 50% of adoptions with children of color are transracial adoptions (Pinderhughes, 2021). Despite this, transracial adoption was not always met with acceptance. In the US, transracial adoption has been and continues to be under question. As domestic transracial adoptions began to rise in the late 1900's, the adoption of Black and Native American children by White families in particular was highly debated. In 1972 the National Association of Black Social Workers made a statement against the placement of Black children with White families (Herman, 2003). In addition, in 1978 the federal government passed the Indian Child Welfare Act in response to conflict over the national effort to transracially adopt Native children with White families throughout the 1950's and 60's (Herman, 2003). These events exemplify situations when a critical lens was applied to transracial adoption and considered the potential cultural and personal losses that may occur in these types of adoptions.

For children adopted internationally into the US, transracial adoptions are very common. These adoptions began in the mid-1900's due to foreign countries'

international and domestic conflicts that resulted in thousands of orphaned children. Transracial adoption continued to raise dramatically in the 70's, 80's, and 90's from countries in Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America. The increase in visibility of transracial adoptions and other social changes in the US led to a greater acceptance of domestic transracial adoptions. In 1994, the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act (MEPA) was enacted and set restrictions on child welfare agencies from denying or delaying foster or adoption placements based on the child or foster or adoptive parents' race (United States, 2020b). This was done in effort to support domestic transracial adoptions and decrease the wait time in foster care for children to be adopted. MEPA also included requirements for adoption agencies to have a comprehensive Diligent Recruitment Plan to promote recruitment of racially and ethnically diverse parents to reflect the population of children for adoption. While transracial adoption has become increasingly accepted, it is worth noting that racial disparities still exist. For example, it has been found that Black and Latino children remain in foster care longer that White children prior to their adoption. Data from 2007 and 2010 also showed that a majority of transracial adoptive parents are White, make up 84% of transracially adoptive parents (Marr, 2017).

Despite international adoption rates decreasing since the early 2000's, understanding the effects of transracial adoption remains relevant. Between the years 2000 and 2012, the proportion of transracial domestic adoptions had increased and between 2005 and 2019, there had been an overall increase in domestic adoption rates (Marr, 2017) (United States, 2020a). Advancements in understandings and policies relating to transracial adoption will also continue to be applicable for both the children

who continue to be transracially adopted, as well as the thousands of transracially adopted individuals who continue to live in the US.

Increasing acceptance of transracial families and structural openness in adoption causes one to ask how these characteristics of adoption may interact and impact the lives of both adoptees and their families. Adoption is not just a single life event. Instead, it influences multiple aspects of a person's identity throughout the lifespan. Researchers have found that transracial adoptees noticed not "matching" parents as early as 4 & 5 years of age (Baden, 2012). As time passes and children reach adolescence, race and ethnicity begin to be more prominent and complexly understood, allowing transracial adoptees to develop new understandings and questions regarding their racial and ethnic identities (Hughes 2001). Adoptees may also begin to develop new ways of understanding themselves, as well as discover new questions and curiosities relating to their adoption. In adolescence, further cognitive and socio-emotional development and may allow adoptees to begin recognizing the personal impacts of their adoption and other aspects of identity outside their immediate family (Kim, 2013). During this period, they may also think more deeply about their birth parents and become curious about them and their past (Berge, 2006). These curiosities may spark adoptees in their adolescence and especially young adulthood, to seek information and connection with their biological family. With this, adolescence is an essential turning point for adoptees as they find new understandings of what has impacted their life and identity. While previous studies with adopted adolescents have found this period to be important to children's identity development, additional research is needed to understand how openness may benefit adolescents when transracial adoption adds layers of intricacy to

their identity. Therefore, the present study is focused on the perspectives and experiences of adoptee adolescents and aims to identify ways to cultivate systems of support in the face of adoption related loss, particularly, loss of connection to birth family and racial kinship ties.

Loss of Birth Parents & Benefits of Openness for Adoptees

Adoption, whether domestic or international, interracial or transracial, may result in an adoptee's loss of connection with their birth family. Openness in adoption, sometimes referred to as structural openness, can be measured as the level of communication between members of adoptive families and birth families after the adoption placement has been made (Brodzinsky, 2006). For adoptees who do not have openness in their adoption, the subsequent loss of birth family and birth parent attachment may be especially challenging, depending on the individual and their coping abilities. Adoptees' relationship with their adoptive family and the abilities of their adoptive parents in initiating and carrying out open conversations about adoption also stand as significant impacts on how an adoptee may respond to their adoption (Farr, 2014). When looking at both same-race and transracial adoption, adoptees' who have negative feelings about the loss of their birth parents reported lower self-worth and higher levels of depression (Smith, 2002). Research highlights that while there is no one right way to cope with adoption related losses, it can be beneficial when adoptive parents acknowledge their child's feelings regarding their birth parents, including feelings of loss and curiosity, as well as facilitate ongoing dialogues with their child surrounding their adoption.

In addition to having open dialogues about adoption between adoptive parents and children, studies exploring same-race adoptions have shown there are benefits to having direct contact between birth families and adoptees. One such study interviewed same race adoptee adolescents about their adoption experiences and their satisfaction with their level of openness with their birth mothers (Berge, 2006). It was seen that many adoptees desired and benefited by having openness, reporting greater positive affect towards their birthmothers and increased identity formation. Conversely, research shows that desiring but lacking the ability to obtain communication with birth parents can be damaging for adoptees. On the other hand, the study also confirms that adoptee perspectives and experiences are diverse, with some adoptees being satisfied without having structural openness in their adoption at all.

Incorporating structural openness in adoption arrangements has also been suggested to be helpful for establishing a stronger sense of self and developing a coherent understanding of one's story, which is inclusive of an adoptees' origins. Interviews and questionaries with adolescents and emerging adults from same race adoptions have shown that bridging the information gap between what adoptees know and what they want to know about their birth family can help them in developing supportive relationships with both adoptive and biological family (Wrobel, 2019). Whether this means incorporating contact with birth family or providing the adoptee with the information they desire, both have the potential to be beneficial for adoptee identity development.

Adoptees seeking openness has also been suggested to be a sign of there being positive relationships and security within one's adoptive family. It is a

misconception that adoptees only seek out communication with birth parents if they feel negativity toward their adoptive parents. Rather, a positive relationship and open communication between adoptees and their adoptive parents are associated with more positive and satisfying communications with birth parents (Farr, 2014). Additionally, studies have seen that structural openness is positively correlated with communication openness amongst the adoptive family and the adoptee (Brodzinsky, 2006). While it seems that adoptees tend to seek birth family contact when their communication and relationship with adoptive family are strong, transracial adoption studies have found that for some adoptees, searching for birth family may be rooted in struggles and confusion with identity (Kirton, 2000).

Transracial Adoption & Identity Development

Adoption can also involve adoptees' loss of connection with birth culture and to people of their same race. This can happen for those who are transracially adopted, that is, those who are placed with parents of a different race than their own. Research has shown that adoptees, including transracial, same-race, international, and domestic adoptees, have normal levels of self-esteem compared to non-adopted children (Juffer, 2007). Transracial adoptees also have been found to be psychologically well adjusted, having comparable amounts of behavioral or emotional problems and social adjustment in comparison to same-race adoptees and non-adopted children (Lee, 2003; Silverman 1993). While research has shown generally positive outcomes for transracial adoptees, deeper investigation is still required to better understand the unique experiences that transracial adoptees face regarding their cultural socialization and identity development.

Typically, transracial adoption in the US involve White parents and non-White children. With this in mind, one specific phenomena that transracial adoptees encounter is the "transracial adoption paradox" (Lee, 2003). This is related to the experiences of transracial adoptees who are minorities and are perceived as such by society but are raised and socialized in the majority culture of their families. One consequence relating to the transracial adoption paradox is adoptees' difficulty in clearly understanding their cultural or racial identity. Cultural identity relates to an adoptees' familiarity and comfortability with their culture, such as traditional beliefs and customs. This is distinguished from one's racial identity, which relates to adoptees' abilities to confront and cope with racial discrimination and prejudice. Studies have shown that adoptive parents can take on many different strategies to navigate and overcome the transracial adoption paradox and its subsequent challenges. Some strategies may include facilitating activities and experiences to aid the child in their racial and ethnic socialization (Barn, 2013; Lee, 2003).

The newly developed term, "reculturation" is used in context with transracial adoptees and their ethnic identity formation (Baden, 2012). It describes the multiple ways that transracial adoptees can come to reclaim their birth culture. The term applies to transracial adoptions in which the child of a minority culture is raised within and accustomed to the dominant White American culture of their family. Reculturation is different than acculturation, which is typically used in context to immigrants (Padilla, 2003). Acculturation involves the internal changes experienced when immigrants come into direct contact with the dominant host culture. Reculturation is different because it is specific to the way adoptees come to reclaim and incorporate their birth culture within

the dominant culture of their families they have already been exposed to growing up. Concepts relating to reculturation are limited to transracial adoptees with White parents but is thought to occur to some extent in all of these individuals. Reculturation is thought to result in a variety of outcomes, including, 1) assimilating to their adoptive, White culture, 2) forming a bicultural identity, 3) completely reclaiming their birth culture, 4) resonating with one's identity as an adoptee rather than either birth or adoptive culture, or 5) developing a combination of any of these previous outcomes (Baden, 2012). To facilitate this reculturation process, adoptees may take part in a variety of activities to achieve connection with their birth culture. This may involve them seeking education about their culture, exposing themselves to experiences and people of their culture, or even immersing themselves more fully with birth culture, such as becoming bilingual or moving to an area where people of their race dominantly reside (Baden, 2012). Each of these pathways to connecting with birth culture shape the way that adoptees come to perceive themselves.

In regard to adoptee racial identity development, it has been made clear that parents play a critical role is socializing and educating their children about navigating the racial distinctions that exist within society (Barn, 2013). There are multiple factors impacting racial identity besides parent education, including cultural messages about race, inter-racial group interactions, and experiences of discrimination (Barn, 2013). Studies suggest that transracial adoptees who experience racial discrimination may be particularly prone to internalizing racial stereotypes (Boivin, 2015). To support children's psychologic well-being, research suggests that both adoptive parents and

professionals recognize the value of their child's racial and ethnic identity, while continuing to establish their child's sense of belonging within their adoptive family.

Previous literature commonly fails to distinguish between the terms "racial", "ethnic", and "cultural" when describing identity development (Boivin, 2015). While each of these aspects impact each other, studies identifying specific impacts to each of these contributors to identity are sparce. While discrimination can be described as ethnically driven, one's racial identity and appearance are closely related to experiences of discrimination (Boivin, 2015). Another study investigated ethnic identity, perceived discrimination, and self-esteem of 2 groups of emerging adults (ages 15-24), nonadopted immigrants and international transracial adoptees. They found that transracial adoptees who had a stronger sense of belonging with their ethnic background were less vulnerable to the negative influence of perceived discrimination. The study points to the importance of adoptees recognizing and valuing their ethnic background to better react against discrimination and protect their well-being (Ferrari, 2017). While the study did not investigate transracial adoptees' relationship with their biological family, it provides insights into the influential role that biological family and intragroup (people with the same racial/ethnic background) interactions can have on identity development and well-being. A separate study of international transracial adoptees found that while developing ethnic identity was beneficial, a moderate level of ethnic identity was optimal for adoptee self-esteem. Extreme approaches, either ignoring birth culture completely or placing too high an emphasis on birth culture, were seen to be negative for the child's development (Mohanty, 2015). Studies on both international

and domestic adoption have affirmed the importance of and challenges related to racial

and ethnicity identity development for transracial adoptees

Transracial Adoption, Birth Searching & Openness

Regardless of what the reculturation or racial-ethnic socialization processes

look like for an adoptee, they may face confusion and uncertainty regarding their racial

and ethnic identity at various points in their childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. In

response to this, one potential avenue adoptees may explore is forming a connection

with their birth family. Literature has shown that some transracial adoptees searched for

their birth family with hopes of finding a sense of racial or cultural identity. Qualitative

interviews with 13 transracial adult adoptees found an overall trend of feeling confusion

and uncertainty regarding their racial and ethnic identities as both children and adults

(Kirton, 2000). While connecting with biological family is not the only way to develop

a sense of racial or cultural identity, searching for one's roots in birth family is one

possible strategy.

In support of this, additional research with mixed race (Black and White

identifying) adults who were domestically adopted by White parents, has shown that

some adoptees seek openness in an effort to gain an "Authentic Black Kinship". This

refers to the way adoptees seek out their same raced birth parent, thereby hoping to

fulfil their desire for belonging and connection to their racial group. Black and

multiracial transracial adoptees have reported facing accusations of not being "black

enough", and even when surrounded by Black peers, feeling accepted and a sense of

belonging was difficult to achieve (Samuels, 2010). When peer relationships led to

these adoptees to question whether they truly belong within their racial community,

finding their biologic family was the next step taken in attempts to ground their racial identity. Some of these mixed-race adoptees who found their Black birth parent noted experiencing a feeling of legitimacy of their racial identity (Samuels, 2010). These experiences hint to the potential benefits that reunion and communication with birth family can have for adoptee racial and ethnic identity development. This previous literature on the impacts of openness and experiences relating to transracial adoption has formed the foundation for the current study, which rests on the premise that there is a unique value in having a personal and on-going connection between adoptees and birth parents, especially for those who are transracially adopted.

Openness in Early Childhood with the Current Data Set

Additional research has shown openness and connection to birth family to be largely beneficial to all parties involved, including birth parents, adoptive parents, and adoptees (Berge 2006; Ge 2008). Using the Early Growth and Development Study (EGDS), researchers found that more openness was related to greater birth parent and adoptive parent adoption satisfaction in the first few years after the adoption placement. Birth parents had also been found to experience a better post-adoption adjustment when there was greater openness (Ge, 2008). In these previous studies, level of openness was evaluated considering reports from both adoptive and birth parents asking about perceived openness, actual contact, and the amount of knowledge known about either birth or adoptive parents. While the EGDS includes both transracial and same race adoptions, the effects of openness on adoptees who are now in adolescence have yet to be described. This the gap in prior research informed my study aims.

Purpose of the Study

The current study incorporates previous research on structural openness with same-race adoptions and research on racial and ethnic identity development in transracial adoption to build a better understanding of nuances in adoptee development and potential ways to further ensure adoptee wellbeing. By exploring how structural openness may impact transracial and same-race adoptees' differently, the study aims to help inform future adoption practitioners on how to best serve adoptees through their formative adolescent years and beyond. Discussing the intersection between openness and racial identity is important to achieving a more comprehensive understanding and support plan for adoptees and their families.

Research Questions & Hypotheses

1. Does level of openness differ between transracial versus same race adoptions?

   Hypothesis: Level of openness will not differ significantly between transracial and same race adoptions. Both groups (transracial and same race) will have a full range of openness levels.

2. Does satisfaction with openness differ between transracial versus same race adoptions?

   Hypothesis: Satisfaction with openness will not differ significantly between transracial and same race adoptions.

3. Does adoptee life satisfaction differ between transracial versus same race adoptions?

   Hypothesis: Adoptee life satisfaction will be lower for transracial adoptees compared to same race adoptees.

4. Do family relationships (between adoptive family and the adopted child) differ between transracial versus same race adoptions?

   Hypothesis: Family relationships will be less positive for transracial adoptees compared to same race adoptees.

5. Does the association between level of openness and life satisfaction differ for transracial versus same-race adoptees?

   Hypotheses: Higher levels of openness will be associated with greater life satisfaction, for both transracial and same-race adoptees.

   Lower levels of openness will be associated with lower life satisfaction for transracial adoptees compared to same-race adoptees.

6. Does the association between level of openness and satisfaction with openness differ for transracial versus same-race adoptees?

   Hypotheses: Higher levels of openness will be associated with greater satisfaction with openness for both transracial and same-race adoptees.

   Lower levels of openness will be associated with lower satisfaction with openness for transracial adoptees compared to same-race adoptees.

Methods

Participants

This study utilizes data from the Early Growth and Development Study (EGDS) (Leve et all, 2019), a longitudinal adoption study which includes adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive parents (*n*=561 adoptees). The current study was carried out using de-identified participant information from the EGDS, which received Institutional Review Board approval. The EGDS examines the influence of family features, peer and social contexts, and other environmental factors that may affect the expression or modification of genetic influences. It also explores behavioral and health outcomes of adoptees overtime. Each adopted child, their biological parent(s) and their adoptive parent(s) form a linked set. Participants of linked sets were recruited in 15 states across the United States through 45 adoption agencies. Eligibility to enter the study included the following criteria: a) adoption placement was domestic to the US, b) placement occurred within 3 months after birth, c) infant was not place with biological relatives, d) infant had no known major health conditions, and e) birth and adoptive understand English at an eight-grade level. The study was open to a variety of adoptive family types, including same-sex, single, and hearing-impaired parents. Of all the adopted children in the study, 57.2% are males, 55.3% are White and the average age of placement was 5.58 days old (SD = 11.32; range = 0–91 days). 19.6% are multiracial, 13.2% are Black, 10.9% are Latinx, <1% are Asian, <1% are Pacific Islander, <1% are American Indian and <1% did not reported ethnicity (a more detailed demographic of the sample can be found at Leve et al, 2019).

Three hundred sixty-one linked sets of adoptive and birth families were first recruited for assessment during the years 2003-2006 (cohort I) and an additional 200 linked sets were recruited from years 2008-2010 (cohort II). The current study focuses specifically on adopted youth in cohort I as they are adolescents (15 years old) and analyzes information collected from questionnaires they completed during at-home visits. For the primary variables of interest in the current study, data collection is still occurring. Of the 361 adoptees from cohort I used in the present analyses, there are currently 91 who reported their current contact arrangements with their biological family, 85 who reported on their satisfaction with their adoption's current contact arrangement, 123 who reported life satisfaction, and 123 who reported on family relationships. Since the measures currently have varying levels of missing data, the reduced sample size used for each research question is detailed in later sections.

Procedures

Linked sets in the EGDS were first assessed around 5 months after the child's birth and in-person assessments of the adoptive family occurred when the child was 9, 18, and 27 months, and 4.5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, and 15 years old. These recurrent assessments were in-person 3-4 hours visits, usually taking place within the participant's home. Nearly 300 different measures were assessed by means including questionnaires, standardized testing, diagnostic interviews, observational interactions, medical records, and more. Separate recruiters were assigned to each set's adoptive parent(s) and birth parent(s) to ensure that no unwanted information is transferred between the members of the adoption linked set.

Measures

Transracial Adoption. Racial identity of adoptive parents and adopted children was categorized using self-reports of race and ethnicity. Adoptions are considered to be "transracial" when both parents, or the sole parent, has a different race or ethnicity than their child. "Same race" adoption is defined as when at least one adoptive parent matches the race of the child. Even when only one adoptive parent has same race as the child, that parent, with their shared racial perspective, is assumed to be an aid for the child in developing an understanding and acceptance of their racial identity. Mixed race children, such as those identifying as Black and White, were categorized as being in a "same race" adoption if at least one parent shared the same minority race (i.e., Black) as the child. This is also based on the understanding that exposure to other racial ingroup members, even when not biologically related, can help the child navigate racial experiences they will inevitably face as they grow up.

Openness of Adoption. To measure openness of the adoption, this study utilized child reports of adoptees' current contact arrangements with their birth parents. Adoptees were asked to indicate their level of communication with each of their birth parents separately on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = never had contact, 2 = never had contact, but adoptive family has, 3 = had contact in the past, but it has stopped, 4 = have continuing contact, but no in-person contact, and 5 = have had face-to-face contact, and is continuing). Level of openness was determined based on an average score from the reported communication with both birth mother and birth father (when available). While birth and adoptive parents have also reported on openness, this study's focus is on adolescents and their current perceptions of their life and adoption.

Satisfaction with Openness of Adoption. Satisfaction with the level of openness in the adoption was gathered from child reports of their perceived level of satisfaction with their current contact arrangements with each of their birth parents. They were asked to rank their satisfaction with contact for each parent on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = extremely dissatisfied, 5 = neutral, and 10 = extremely satisfied). Satisfaction with openness of adoption was determined based on an average score from the reported level of satisfaction with both birth mother and birth father communication (when available).

Life Satisfaction. Utilizing health measurements from the Patient-Reported Outcomes Measurement Information System (PROMIS) (Northwestern University, 2018b), adopted adolescents (age 15 years) participated in at-home visits where they responded to statements asking about their life satisfaction within the last 4 weeks. The self-report required them to rank how much they related with the statements on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = not at all, 5 = very much). Examples of the eight total questions in the survey include, "I was happy with my family life", "I was happy with my life", and "I was satisfied with my skills and talents". The higher the score from the measure, the higher their reported life satisfaction.

Family Relationships. Using the Family Relationships survey developed under PROMIS (Northwestern University, 2018a), adoptees at age 15 reported on the state of their family relationships within the past 4 weeks. During at-home visits, they indicated how often each statement regarding their family relationships were true on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = never, 5 = always). Examples of eight total statements in the survey include, "I felt really important to my family…", "My family treated me fairly", and "My parents

listened to me…". Higher scores from the measure indicate stronger family relationships.

Additional Independent Variables

Child Biological Sex. The biological sex of the adoptee was considered given the known differences in internalizing social stressors based on sex. Studies have found that by around the age of 12-13 years, adolescents typically exhibit differences in depressive symptoms. Girls are observed to report greater exposure to interpersonal stressors (e.g., family and peers) compared to boys. Girls also tend to exhibit greater symptoms of depression (Hankin, Mermelstein, & Roesch, 2007) and generally lower levels of life satisfaction compared to boys (Walsh et al., 2020).

Adoptive Parent Partner Warmth. Adoptive parent's warmth was used as an indicator of the level of warmth and support between partners. This was measured using the Behavior Affect Rating Scale (BARS) (Conger, 1994) where each adoptive parent would be scored on based on their responses regarding themselves and their partner and their partner's interaction with them. These scores for warmth were collected separately for each partner. They responded to the questions on a scale of 1 to 7 (1 = always, 7 = never). The higher the score for each indicator, the greater the level of warmth. This study utilized one adoptive parent's assessment of their partner's warmth toward them. This measure was significantly correlated ($p < 0.05$ or lower) for each parent's measure of warmth.

Social Economic Status. Social economic status (SES) was assessed using average household income reported by both adoptive parents. The reported income bracket of the family was used to determine their income level in comparison to the poverty guideline based the number of people in the household, which is provided by the US government every year.

Analytic Plan

To answer each research question, the corresponding data analyses were conducted.

1. A t-test was used to determine whether there was a difference in levels of openness between transracial adoptees and same-race adoptees.

2. A t-test was used to determine whether there was a difference in satisfaction with openness between transracial adoptees and same-race adoptee.

3. A t-test was used to determine whether there was a difference in life satisfaction between transracial adoptees and same-race adoptee.

4. A t-test was used to determine whether there was a difference in family relationships between transracial adoptees and same-race adoptee.

5. A moderation regression analysis was conducted to determine if the relationship between openness and life satisfaction was affected by the type of adoption (i.e., transracial or same race).

6. A moderation regression analysis was conducted to determine if the relationship between level of openness and satisfaction with openness was affected by the type of adoption (i.e., transracial or same race).

Results

Using the criteria for transracial and same race adoption previously described the entire cohort I contained 88 transracial adoptees and 229 same race adoptees. 44 of the 361 adoptees in the cohort were marked as unknown for the transracial or same race adoption distinction, given the available information on the children and parents' race.

Of the transracial adoptions, the most frequent races for children were Black, Latino, and mixed race. The most frequent demographic for these mixed-race children was mixed Black and White. For the adoptive parents of transracial adoptees, the vast majority of parents were White. Of the same race adoptions, the vast majority of adoptees and adoptive parents were White. A more detailed breakdown of the demographics can be found in Tables 1 and 2.

Correlations between all study variables were assessed. Correlations indicated a significant association between life satisfaction and family relationships (r (121) = 637, $p < .01$). Additionally, openness and satisfaction with openness were significantly correlated ($p < .05$). A correlation matrix is provided in Table 3.

Question 1. Of the transracial adoptees ($n = 32$) and same race adoptees ($n = 59$) who reported on the level of openness in their adoption, there was no significant differences between transracial adoptees ($M = 2.42$, $SD = 1.33$) and same race adoptees ($M = 2.53$, $SD = 1.11$), t (54) = -0.396, $p = 0.709$). After completing a Levene's test, it was found that analyses did not assume equal variance between the adoption types.

Question 2. Of the transracial adoptees ($n = 31$) and same race adoptees ($n = 54$) who reported on their satisfaction with the level of openness in their adoption, there was no significant difference between transracial adoptees ($M = 6.50$, SD $= 2.94$) and same

race adoptees ($M = 5.64$, SD $= 2.34$), t (52) $= 1.40$, $p = 0.169$). A Levene's test found that analyses did not assume equal variance between the adoption types.

Question 3. Of the transracial adoptees ($n = 44$) and same race adoptees ($n = 79$) who reported on their life satisfaction, there was no significant difference between transracial adoptees ($M = 45.36$, $SD = 10.54$) and same race adoptees ($M = 45.17$, $SD = 9.92$), t (121) $= 0.098$, $p = 0.92$). A Levene's test found that analyses did assume equal variance between the adoption types.

Question 4. Of the transracial adoptees ($n = 44$) and same race adoptees ($n = 79$) who reported on their family relationships, there was no significant difference between transracial adoptees ($M = 46.17$, $SD = 8.77$) and same race adoptees ($M = 45.35$, $SD = 10.98$), t (106) $= 0.455$, $p=0.65$). A Levene's test found that analyses did not assume equal variance between the adoption types.

Question 5. Of the 123 adoptees who had reported life satisfaction, 71 adoptees also had available data on their current contact agreements with birth parents, child sex, parental partner warmth, and household income. For this reduced sample of 71, a regression analysis showed a trend toward moderation such that the positive relationship between life satisfaction and openness ($r = 0.409$, $p = 0.0610$) was negatively moderated by same race adoption (beta coefficient $= -2.94$, $p = 0.13$). For transracial adoptees, more openness was associated with higher life satisfaction. In contrast, for the same race adoptees, more openness was associated with slightly lower life satisfaction. Despite these trends, the statistics behind the associations lacked power and were not found to be significant at the conventional p < .05 level. The additional

independent variables, child sex, parental partner warmth, and household income were analyzed and were not found to be significantly associated with life satisfaction.

Question 6. Of the 85 adoptees who had reported satisfaction with their adoption's level of openness, 66 adoptees also had available data on their current contact agreements with birth parents, child sex, parental partner warmth, and household income. For this reduced sample of 66 adoptees, a regression analysis showed that the positive relationship between openness and satisfaction with openness ($r = 0.352$, $p = 0.234$) did not differ significantly for same race or transracial adoptions (Interaction coefficient = 0.0426, $p = 0.936$). However, adolescents in same race adoptions overall showed lower scores for satisfaction with adoption openness at every level of openness compared to transracial adoptees. Overall, both same race and transracial adoptees showed that more openness was associated with greater satisfaction with the level of openness in their adoption. However, this trend was not significant. Child sex, parental partner warmth, and household income were all not found to be significant contributors to satisfaction with adoption openness.

For research questions 5 and 6, although the analyses resulted in nonsignificant results, the data may suggest trends toward greater levels of openness being related to greater life satisfaction and satisfaction with one's adoption's openness for transracial adoptions in comparison to same race adoptees.

Discussion

While the positive effects of openness in adoption are widely accepted, comparing the effects of openness for transracial and same race adoption is a relatively new pursuit. When comparing results from transracial and same race adoptees, no significant differences were found in their level of openness, satisfaction with their adoption's openness, life satisfaction, or the strength of their family relationships.

Results are consistent with the hypothesis that domestic adoptions, both transracial and same race, would exhibit full ranges of openness. Therefore, it is logical and consistent with the hypothesis that when both transracial and same race adoptees in the study exhibited a full spectrum of openness levels, their level of satisfaction with openness would also not differ. These findings that connect openness with increased satisfaction with openness are consistent with previous research. It had been found in mixed populations of adoptees, both transracial and same race, that with increased levels of structural openness and access to information, adoptees had improved well-being in the areas of self-esteem and behavioral problems (Brodzinsky, 2008). Although the current study's results did not support the hypotheses that transracial adoptees would have lower life satisfaction and family relationships than same race adoptees, life satisfaction and family relationships were found to be associated for the sample as a whole.

When looking at research questions 5 & 6, which ask about how the level of openness impacts outcomes for transracial and same race adoptees, there did appear to be a differential affect between these two subgroups of adoptees. Although the statistical power was not sufficient to indicate a significant difference, the data partially

supported my hypotheses that openness for transracial adoptees may be associated with both greater life satisfaction and satisfaction with the level of openness in their adoption. With low statistical power from the analyses, these trends my change or disappear with more participants. Potential limitations that may have contributed to the lack of significance are discussed in depth in the next section titled limitations.

Previous studies on transracial adoption impact the theory behind why openness may differentially affect transracial adoptees. While each adoptee is unique and not all transracial adoptees may struggle with their racial or ethnic identity, it is apparent that transracial adoptees within White families may face negative experiences, such as discrimination or microaggressions (Palacios, 2019). Socialization within a transracial family, away from people of their same racial or ethnic group, may affect the way adoptees internalize and learn to respond to identity-based discrimination. Therefore, connection to birth family, facilitated by greater structural openness, may mediate the potential difficulties they may face in their racial-ethnic identity development, impacting their satisfaction with life and the state of their adoption.

Some possible areas of variance between adoptees may include differences in personal feelings toward openness and the personal awareness a child has of their identity. Each adoptee and family is unique, and it is important to acknowledge that openness in an adoption arrangement is not desired by all. In fact, it has been seen that some adoptees were happy and satisfied without it in their lives (Berge, 2006). Some adoptees may see openness as a way of gaining more information and connection with one's origin story. On the other hand, openness may also be seen as a connection that may cause greater anxiety and uncertainty. In addition, the age that adolescents begin to

think critically about their adoptee identity may differ greatly. Even though the children in this study were around the age of 15, this may still be an early age for them to have developed a conscious understanding of how their race and adoption have impacted them (Samuels, 2010). They may also not have immediately considered aspects of race or their adoption when answering surveys regarding broad concepts such as life satisfaction and family relationships. Although adolescence is a crucial time for identity development, later stages in life, such as young adulthood and times when adoptees form families of their own, may lead to new and more complex understandings regarding their adoption.

While the positive effects of openness were not disproven by the findings of this study, the slight decrease in life satisfaction for same race adoptees with increasing openness may imply that not all adoptees will benefit from openness in the same way. The number of same race adoptees in the sample was much larger than the number of transracial adoptees and this may suggest that by having a larger sample size, the varied outcomes, inherent to the diverse experiences of adoptees, may be accounted for. The inconclusive results may be due to the fact that openness is by no means the only factor contributing to a child's life satisfaction, regardless of whether one is in a transracial or same race adoption.

Additional factors, such as open communication within the adoptive family, may have greater influence on an adoptee's adjustment and appraisals of their adoption compared to structural openness alone. Regardless of the level of structural openness, whether adoptees have an ongoing relationship with birth family or are coming to

accept the unanswered questions in their lives, open communication within a family is essential to adoptees' positive identity formation (Henze-Pedersen, 2019).

Limitations

There are a number of limitations to the present study that could help explain why no significant differences were detected between transracial and same race adoptees. Considering the diversity of individuals within each of these types of adoptees, it is plausible that many factors beyond adoption type will impact adoptee life satisfaction and family relationships. As mentioned in the previous section, variations in racial-ethnic socialization and the openness of communication between children and their adoptive parents may be some of the factors impacting the individual variance in thoughts regarding adoption and the age at which these thoughts present themselves in an adoptee's life.

In addition, the measures life satisfaction, family relationships, and satisfaction with adoption openness, were all selected from preexisting data within the EGDS. No new measures specific to this study's specific research aims were created. While the measures succeed in gauging a broad understanding of the study's participants, they fail to dig into the complex and multifaceted experiences that accompany adoption and transracial adoption specifically. For example, it may have been more productive to survey participants on life satisfaction specifically with respect to their adoption and the extent to which they sense a feeling a loss due to their adoption. Family relationships may also be investigated in a more productive way be asking about the extend to which they engage in adoption related communication within their family. Differences between transracial and same race adoptees may also be better understood by framing

questions to allow for perspectives of racial and identity to emerge. With the study's

current methods, these adoptees may not have been directly thinking about their racial

or ethnic identities, nor had the chance for their responses to reflect these perspectives

precisely.

An additional limitation includes the narrowed sample size. The total EGDS

sample in cohort I had many more same race adoptions ($n = 229$) than transracial

adoptions ($n = 88$). In addition, as described previously, the sample size for each

research question was significantly reduced based on whether that data had been

collected from the participants yet. More significant trends may be achieved if analyses

were completed again when all study participants have been surveyed.

Implications & Future Directions

Adoption, accompanied by both gains and losses, is a viable way of forming

family and can provide adoptees with the permanence and supportive relationships they

need. While these strong relationships are vital to a child's development, the positive

effects of openness indicate that avenues to openness should be made available to

adoptees by adoption entities. Additionally, entities overseeing adoption arrangements

should prioritize the collection and preservation of information about adoptees and

ways to trace back their origins. Adoptees and families should also be provided with

access to adoption informed counseling and guidance to aid them in navigating the

challenges of adoption and managing any new information they may acquire through

more structural openness.

Regardless of whether structural openness or race matching between adoptive

parents and children is possible, families can take steps to support adoptees through

potential past trauma and adoption related challenges that may develop over time. For transracial adoptees in particular, the extent to which a family embraces being racially mixed will impact whether they will take steps to facilitate the reculturation of their adopted child. There are many aspects of a child's environment that adoptive families may influence to aid in the child's reculturation with their birth culture. Family, peers, neighborhoods, communities, popular culture, and media are all significant influences for development (Baden, 2012). For children who grow up away from people of their same race and within the dominant White culture of their family, it is still possible for them to find meaningful connection and exposure to aspects of their heritage by other means. One example may be helping the child be closer to racially and ethnically diverse communities where they can feel represented and find support to better understanding of themselves in relation to their racial or ethnic group. If this connection and exposure to same raced individuals is by way of communication with an adoptee's birth family, it is important to know that even though children may have greater access to knowledge about their origins, they may still not be able to explore topics like racial identity with them. Proximity alone, whether that be to birth family or non-related people of the same race, is not synonymous with a child having meaningful conversations relating to race or their identity.

It is also especially important that White parents of non-White children are conscious of how they and other racial groups may experience and perceive race. This racial awareness will help parents better support their children, especially as their child's perceptions of identity develop with age. Supporting transracial adoptees in developing their ethnic identity is helpful for the development of a more positive self-

esteem (Mohanty, 2015) and can help improve their understanding of themselves. Parents may also find their children are better equipped with the knowledge they need for responding to any racially charged microaggressions and offenses they may receive throughout their life. Supporting adoptees may also lead them to find belonging and resonate with their identity as an adoptee. Adoptees, many who juggle a balancing act of families, cultures, identities, and emotions, face complex experiences that warrant a deeper investigation and awareness amongst human service providers and adoptive families. This study highlights the potential affects that openness and race matching in adoption can have on adoptees. However, it is just the beginning of the progress that future research could bring for the adoption community. Future research may continue to follow the adoptee adolescents in the EGDS into their young adulthood and perhaps ask them more directly about how their adoption specifically impacts various aspects of identity. Future directions may also include investigation of the perceived effects of openness and race for adult adoptees, as well as differentiate how the experiences of unique racial groups may differ.

Tables

Table 1: Racial Demographic Frequencies of Transracial Adoptions (Total: 88)			
	Adoptive Parent 1	Adoptive Parent 2	Adopted Child
American Indian/Alaskan Native			1
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander			
Asian	1		1
Black/African American			30
White	85	83	1
More than 1 race		1	27
Hispanic or Latino	2	1	28
Unknown		1	
Missing			

Table 1: Racial Demographic Frequencies of Members of Families involved in Transracial
Adoptions

Table 2: Racial Demographic Frequencies of Same Race Adoptions (Total: 229)			
	Adoptive Parent 1	Adoptive Parent 2	Adopted Child
American Indian/Alaskan Native			
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander		1	
Asian	1	1	
Black/African American	11	11	10
White	207	207	205
More than 1 race	3	2	8
Hispanic or Latino	7.0	1	6
Unknown		1	
Missing		2	

Table 2: Racial Demographic Frequencies of Members of Families involved in Same Race
Adoptions

Table 3: Correlations Among Study Variables

Table 3: Correlations Among Study Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Transracial/Same Race Adoption							
2. Openness	0.042						
3. Openness Satisfaction	-0.161	.246*					
4. Life Satisfaction	-0.009	-0.062	0.118				
5. Family Relationships	-0.039	-0.179	0.049	.637**			
6. Child's Sex	-0.050	0.018	-0.078	0.010	-0.002		
7. Maternal Warmth	-0.061	-0.059	0.042	0.044	0.070	0.003	
8. Income	0.071	0.060	-0.058	0.054	0.025	-0.049	-0.038

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Bibliography

Baden, A. L., Treweeke, L. M., & Ahluwalia, M. K. (2012). Reclaiming culture: Reculturation of transracial and international adoptees. *Journal of Counseling & Development,* 90(4), 387-399. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.2012.00049.x

Barn, R. (2013). 'Doing the right thing': transracial adoption in the USA. *Ethnic and Racial Studies,* 36(8), 1273-1291. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2013.770543

Berge, J. M., Mendenhall, T. J., Wrobel, G. M., Grotevant, H. D., & McRoy, R. G. (2006). Adolescents' feelings about openness in adoption: Implications for adoption agencies. *Child Welfare*, 85(6), 1011–1039. https://doi.org/0009-4021/2006/0501011-28

Boivin, M., & Hassan, G. (2015). Ethnic identity and psychological adjustment in transracial adoptees: A review of the literature. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 38(7), 1084-1103. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2014.992922

Brodzinsky, D. (2006). Family structural openness and communication openness as predictors in the adjustment of adopted children. *Adoption Quarterly*, 9(4), 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1300/J145v09n04_01

Brodzinsky, D. M. (2011). Children's understanding of adoption: Developmental and clinical implications. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 42(2), 200. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022415

Conger, R. D., & Elder, G. H. (1995). Families in Troubled Times: Adapting to Change in Rural America.

Farr, R. H., Grant-Marsney, H. A., & Grotevant, H. D. (2014). Adoptees' contact with birth parents in emerging adulthood: The role of adoption communication and attachment to adoptive parents. *Family Process,* 53(4), 656–671. https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12069

Ferrari, L., Rosnati, R., Canzi, E., Ballerini, A., & Ranieri, S. (2017). How international transracial adoptees and immigrants cope with discrimination? The moderating role of ethnic identity in the relation between perceived discrimination and psychological well-being. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 27(6), 437-449. https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2325

Ge, X., Natsuaki, M. N., Martin, D. M., Leve, L. D., Neiderhiser, J. M., Shaw, D. S., … Reiss, D. (2008). Bridging the divide: openness in adoption and postadoption psychosocial adjustment among birth and adoptive parents. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 22(4), 529–540. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0012817

Herman, E. (2003). The adoption history project.

Hughes, D., & Johnson, D. (2001). Correlates in children's experiences of parents' racial socialization behaviors. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 63*(4), 981-995. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2001.00981.x

Kirton, Derek, Julia Feast, and David Howe. "Searching, reunion and transracial adoption." *Adoption & Fostering* 24.3 (2000): 6-18. https://doi.org/10.1177/030857590002400303

Kim, O. M., Reichwald, R., & Lee, R. (2013). Cultural socialization in families with adopted Korean adolescents: A mixed-method, multi-informant study. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 28*(1), 69-95. https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558411432636

Lee, R. M. (2003). The transracial adoption paradox: History, research, and counseling implications of cultural socialization. *The counseling psychologist*, 31(6), 711-744. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000003258087

Leve, L. D., Neiderhiser, J. M., Ganiban, J. M., Natsuaki, M. N., Shaw, D. S., & Reiss, D. (2019). The Early Growth and Development Study: A dual-family adoption study from birth through adolescence. *Twin Research and Human Genetics*, 22(6), 716–727. https://doi.org/10.1017/thg.2019.66

Marr, E. (2017). U.S. Transracial Adoption Trends in the 21st Century. *Adoption Quarterly*, *20*(3), 222–251. https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2017.1291458

Martin, D. M., Leve, L. D., Natsuaki, M. N., Neiderhiser, J. M., Ge, X., Altwood, T. C., ... & Callahan, N. F. (2011). Toward a greater understanding of openness: A report from the Early Growth and Development Study. *National Council of Adoption's Factbook V*, 471-477.

Mohanty, J. (2015). Ethnic identity and psychological well-being of international Transracial adoptees: A Curvilinear Relationship. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 2015(150), 33-45. https://doi.org/10.1002/cad.20117

Northwestern University. (2018a) Patient-Reported Outcomes Measurement Information System: Family Relationships. healthmeasures.net/images/PROMIS/manuals/PROMIS_Pediatric_and_Parent_Proxy_Family_Relationships_Scoring_Manual.pdf

Northwestern University. (2018b) Patient-Reported Outcomes Measurement Information System: Life Satisfaction. healthmeasures.net/images/PROMIS/manuals/PROMIS_Life_Satisfaction_Scoring_Manual.pdf

Padilla, A. M., & Perez, W. (2003). Acculturation, social identity, and social cognition: A new perspective. *Hispanic journal of behavioral sciences*, 25(1), 35-55. https://doi.org/10.1177/0739986303251694

Palacios, J., Adroher, S., Brodzinsky, D. M., Grotevant, H. D., Johnson, D. E., Juffer, F., ...& Tarren-Sweeney, M. (2019). Adoption in the service of child protection: An international interdisciplinary perspective. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 25(2), 57–72. https://doi.org/10.1037/law0000192

Pinderhughes, E. E., Matthews, J. A., Zhang, X., & Scott, J. C. (2021). Unpacking complexities in ethnic–racial socialization in transracial adoptive families: A process-oriented transactional system. *Development and Psychopathology*, 33(2), 493-505. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579420001741

Samuels, G. M. (2010). Building kinship and community: Relational processes of bicultural identity among adult multiracial adoptees. *Family Process*, 49(1), 26-42. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.2010.01306.x

Silverman, A. R. (1993). Outcomes of transracial adoption. *The Future of Children*, 104-118. https://doi.org/10.2307/1602405

Smith, D. W., & Brodzinsky, D. M. (2002). Coping with birthparent loss in adopted children. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines*, 43(2), 213–223. https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-7610.00014

United States, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (2020a, December). Transracial Adoption from Foster Care in the U.S.. aspe.hhs.gov/. https://aspe.hhs.gov/system/files/pdf/264526/MEPA-Graphical-Factsheet.pdf

United States, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (2020b, December). The Multiethnic Placement Act 25 Years Later. aspe.hhs.gov/. https://aspe.hhs.gov/system/files/pdf/264526/MEPA-Research-summary.pdf

Whitesel, A. L., Dismukes, A., White, D., Guyer, S., Ganiban, J. M., Leve, L. D., & Neiderhiser, J. M. (2020). The Early Growth and Development Study: Using an adoption design to understand family influences and child development. *In The Routledge Handbook Of Adoption* (pp. 90-104). Routledge.

Wrobel, G. M., & Grotevant, H. D. (2019). Minding the (Information) Gap: What do emerging adult adoptees want to know about their birth parents? *Adoption quarterly,* 22(1), 29-52. https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2018.1488332