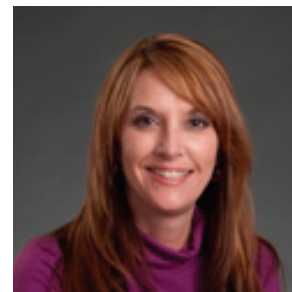


# **Transracial Adoption: Promoting Racial Literacy or Perpetuating Colorblind Racism?**

Christine Richardson: McNair Scholar

Dr. Arthur Scarritt: Mentor

Sociology



## **Abstract**

*How do white adoptive parents of black children teach their children to navigate race? In 1994 Congress passed the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act (MEPA) removing race as a consideration in adoptive placements, effectively opening up the pool of adoptable black infants to middle class white couples. Inspired by France Twine's study on how white members of black/white couples developed "racial literacy," this qualitative study is based on semi-structured interviews with 20 adoptive parents. My findings show that although parents are open to anti-racist practices, they lack the required insight to follow through. Parents are conflicted between perceptions of how racism operates in society and their actual lived experiences, illuminating their struggle to reconcile the two in order to develop a critical lens through which to analyze race. I argue that MEPA is a colorblind racist policy that reproduces colorblind racism through its failure to provide parents with adequate resources concerning race and racism.*

## **Introduction**

How do white adoptive parents of black children teach their children to navigate a highly racialized world? Does transracial adoption transform parents understanding of how racism operates and facilitate the development of a critical lens through which race is analyzed? Or do white parents reproduce the existing racial hierarchy? Seeking answers to these questions, I interviewed 20 white adoptive parents of black children in this qualitative study.

In "A White Side of Black Britain," France Winddance Twine showed how "interracial intimacy is a micro level political site where white people can acquire a critical analytical lens" that transforms their understanding of how racism operates. Expanding on Winddance Twine's work, this study sought to discover whether transracial adoption, a different form of interracial intimacy, promotes the development of "racial literacy" similarly to what Twine found in her study of black/white couples. What I found was that parents failed to acquire the critical analytical lens Winddance Twine described and instead viewed race through a colorblind lens.

Enabled by the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act which removed race as a consideration in adoptive placements, white adoptive parents of black children assume their role armed with an abundance of love but very little life experience that would teach them to identify and respond to racist incidents. This study, then, seeks to document the extent to which white parents of black children are perpetuating colorblind racism. It specifically looks at the parent's beliefs regarding race and racism, the extent to which they are perpetuating colorblind racism, and the forces that push them to reproduce it. I argue that the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act is a colorblind racist policy that perpetuates colorblind racism through its failure to provide parents with adequate resources concerning race and racism. My findings show that parents are conflicted between their perception of how racism operates in society and their actual lived experiences, illuminating their struggle to reconcile the two in order to develop a critical lens through which to analyze race.

In the following pages, I reveal relevant unanswered questions in the existing literature regarding white adoptive parent's attitudes and beliefs concerning the role race will play in their children's lives. I sought to answer these questions by conducting semi-structured interviews, using open-ended questions with 20 adoptive parents. Placing my findings within the framework of Guinier and Torres rules of colorblind racism, I then demonstrate how parent's responses fit into each of the three rules. My findings explore the tension that exists between parent's colorblind ideology and their actual lived experiences with racism, supporting the need for pre-adoptive education and post-adoption support for transracial adoptive families.

## Existing research: Identity formation, resources, and whiteness studies

A review of the literature indicates that much research has been done on the outcome of transracial adoptions, primarily focusing on identity issues of the adoptee (Samuels, 2009). Transracial adoption is a fairly recent phenomenon in the United States and much of the research has been centered on the debate over the ethics of placing black children with white families (Tuan, 2008 and Fogg-Davis, 2002).

Outside of the literature pertaining to adoption, a great deal of research has been conducted in the form of “whiteness” studies (Frankenberg, 1993). In “White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness” (1993), Frankenberg argues that white women in relationships with black men undergo a transformation in their awareness and understanding of race and racism along with acquiring an understanding of the many benefits of being white. Similarly, it would seem that transracial adoption offers an opportunity for whites to have a transformative experience in their understanding of race and racism through their relationship with their children of color. France Winddance Twine expanded on this with her concept of “racial literacy,” developed as the result of a seven year ethnography focused on the biological white parents of African-descent children (Winddance Twine, 2004). In the study, as well as a study on black/white interracial relationships, Winddance Twine suggests that “interracial intimacy is a micro level political site where White people can acquire a critical analytical lens” that transforms their understanding of how racism operates. Building upon the work of Frankenberg, Winddance Twine focused on parents whom she classified “racism cognizant,” meaning that “they identified racism as a serious problem for their children and had concluded that it is either undesirable or impossible for their children to manage everyday racism if they are not taught how to identify and respond to racial hierarchies and resist racisms.”

I found few studies centered on the adoptive parents themselves. One important exception interviewed transracial adoptive parents in order to identify issues that required resources that are unavailable to them (deHaymes and Simon, 2003). In another, Patricia Jennings investigated how race relations influence infertile women’s choices of race in their decision to adopt (Jennings, 2006). DeHaymes and Simon found that the majority of adoptive parents were disappointed with the training and resources they were provided with pertaining to race. Additionally, many of the adoptees they interviewed felt their parents were not equipped to handle issues of discrimination or racism, leaving them to cope on their own. This is congruent with the opinions expressed by adoptees in Samuels’s study, “Being Raised by White People” (2009) who reported feeling alienated from others who could provide insight into their lived experience with race. In both studies, adoptees felt that their parents often dismissed racist incidents as being similar to other childhood name-calling. This study builds upon the work of deHaymes and Simon, as well as Samuels by further investigating the adoptive parent’s attitudes and ideas concerning the role of race in their children’s lives. Focusing on the parent’s perceptions can be useful to determine what is driving the behavior that results in their adopted children feeling abandoned when it comes to dealing with race. Understanding the cause of these discordant parent-child relationships can help professionals and policy makers look for solutions that will address the underlying issues and better serve the adoption community.

## What racism? The great disconnect

Expanding upon Winddance Twine’s work which studied the white biological mothers of black children in Great Britain, this study looks at MEPA enabled white adoptive parents of African American children and their perception of the level of importance race plays or will play in their children’s lives. Initially I expected to find that parents had developed a great deal of racial literacy, as the white biological parents and white partners in interracial relationships had in Winddance Twine’s study, however that was not the case. Instead, I found that parents failed to acquire the critical analytical lens Winddance Twine described and instead viewed race through a colorblind lens. This study, then, seeks to document the extent to which white parents of black children are perpetuating colorblind racism. It specifically looks at their beliefs regarding race and racism, the extent to which they are perpetuating colorblind racism, and the forces that push them to reproduce it. I argue that the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act is a colorblind racist policy that perpetuates colorblind racism through its failure to provide parents with adequate resources concerning race and racism. My findings show that parents seem to be conflicted between their perception of how racism operates in society and their actual lived experiences. Their colorblind lens encourages them to dismiss incidents of racism or discrimination as being due to factors other than race, often leading them to a contradiction between these experiences and their ideas about race and society.

This study provides empirical evidence of the colorblind ideology that overwhelmingly exists in a group of adoptive parents, supporting the existing scholarship that suggests policy changes requiring training for those considering transracial adoption.

## Methods

I recruited white adoptive parents of black children who completed their adoption over eight years ago for this study in two ways. First, as a white adoptive parent of two black children and the former Secretary of Families of MAC (Multi-Cultural and Adopted Children), a support group for adoptive families which disbanded 8 years ago, I had access to a membership roster which I used to contact former members to recruit for the study. I then used the snowballing method to gain referrals by asking the parents to identify other adoptive parents who might be willing to participate in the study. Once participants were selected, in-depth, semi-structured, phenomenological based interviews lasting from 1 to 2 hours were conducted with parents from 20 families, 17 of them with the mothers only and the remaining 3 with both the mother and father. The interviews were conducted using open-ended questions, which allowed participants to recount their experiences with racism and elaborate on their beliefs pertaining to parenting and race. All parents self-identified as being middle to upper-middle class and their ages ranged from 32 to 56, with adopted children who ranged in age from 3 to 19 and biological children who ranged in age from 4 to 26 years old. All of the families completed domestic adoptions through private adoption agencies located in Boise, Idaho that worked with private agencies in other states such as Texas, Ohio, California, and Florida where the babies were born. Of the 23 parents interviewed, 14 had bachelor's degrees; one had a master's degree, and one a doctorate. Twelve women were stay at home moms, with the rest employed in occupations such as a real estate agent, a teacher, a dentist, a financial planner, and a florist. Nine of the families also had biological children, and of the remaining 11 families, ten adopted due to infertility and one adopted because they didn't wish to contribute to the expanding population of the world.

This study was conducted in Boise, Idaho, a semi-progressive area of a non-progressive state with minimal diversity. Idaho is among the top five states with the highest overall rates of transracial adoption (Hansen/Simon 2004). The availability of families who have completed transracial adoptions, along with the dominance of white culture/lack of diversity in this overwhelmingly white state make the study particularly revealing of the forces of hegemonic whiteness that contribute to the dominance of colorblind ideology.

I conducted the interviews at mutually agreed upon locations, including coffee shops and participants homes where the interviews were digitally recorded. I then transcribed the interviews so that they could be analyzed using the Grounded Theory Method (Glaser & Strauss) to look for recurring themes from which to develop a system of codes. A cross-case analysis was done, looking for the identified themes among multiple cases and coding them accordingly. After the data were coded, it was possible to identify and analyze patterns and related concepts in order to form a grounded theory.

The case-oriented analysis method is unique in the fact that cases are chosen for theoretical, rather than statistical purposes and random selection is neither desirable nor necessary (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

## Colorblind racism

In the post-civil rights era, the United States has adopted a colorblind approach to racism, essentially denying the subtle forms of discrimination that have replaced the blatant racism of the past. Race has disappeared as a "hot topic" of discussion and many Americans deny the existence of racism completely, claiming that racism is a thing of the past and either ignoring the persisting disparities in income, education, and wealth between blacks and whites or acknowledging the disparity as being a result of blacks being lazy. Denying the significance of race allows whites to discount the privileges they receive from their white skin along with normalizing their whiteness. According to Ruth Frankenberg, this colorblind approach ignores the fact that skin color plays a powerful role in shaping an individual's life experiences. Whites do not make the connection between their skin color and the structural benefits they receive in society (Lipsitz). Color-blind racism allows whites to maintain their position of privilege without appearing racist (Bonilla-Silva, 2001).

## The Multi-Ethnic Placement Act

In 1994, Congress passed the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act (MEPA) which removed race as a consideration in adoptive placements. This made it easier for middle class white couples to adopt, as it opened the pool of adoptable children up to include other races. Additionally, congress enacted legislation providing a tax credit for adoptive families, making the cost of adoption feasible for more middle class couples. The stated intention of MEPA was to transition more children from foster care into permanent homes; however statistics do not show a significant

increase in those numbers. According to Mary Eschelbach Hansen and Rita J. Simon (2004), there has not been an increase in state assisted transracial adoptions at the national level since the passage of MEPA. While it failed to meet its goal of decreasing the number of black children in foster care, MEPA did remove race as a consideration in *any* adoption which facilitated the adoption of black infants by white parents through private adoption agencies. This change favored the consumptive choices of infertile, white, middle and upper-class heterosexual couples as the availability of children of color exceeds the availability of white infants (Patton, 2002 and Quiroz, 2008).

While it paved the way for whites to adopt children of color, MEPA failed to mandate any form of education or training for parents wishing to adopt transracially. With no federal guidelines in place, adoption agencies determine whether racial/cultural education is offered to adoptive parents or not and requirements vary from agency to agency and state to state. Some agencies require as little as a questionnaire concerning parents' attitudes toward race to be completed prior to adoption, minimizing the complexity of race relations and ignoring the reality of what it means to have black skin in America.

## Transracial adoption: Colorblind practices

The Multi-ethnic Placement Act is just one aspect of adoption that ignores racial differences in favor of a colorblind ideology. Further evidence of colorblind practices can be seen in the way children are categorized by adoption agencies. Although the adoption of a child from any race by parents from a different race would be considered a transracial adoption, the term is reserved for black children adopted by white families in current adoption discourse (Tuan, 2008). Common practice in adoption discourse, as evidenced on adoption agencies websites, is to divide children into three racial categories of black, multi-racial (black/white combination), with the remaining children grouped together in a non-labeled category. The absence of a label on the third group of children establishes whiteness as the normative race without any cultural markers, making it easier for whites to ignore the privileges attached to their whiteness (Frankenberg, 1993). This tripartite system of categorization is one of the components of colorblind racism described by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and is indicative of the colorblind racism that exists within the arena of adoption (Quiroz, 2007).

Finally, as Hawley Fogg-Davis points out, the fact that adoptive parents are allowed to choose the race of the child they are adopting can be viewed as racial discrimination against the children who are waiting to be adopted. However, rather than labeling this discrimination, adopting children of color (or not adopting them) is seen as a matter of individual taste as well as a partial solution to poverty and racism, another indication of Bonilla-Silva's concept of colorblind racism (Quiroz, 2007).

Given the pervasiveness of colorblind ideology throughout the adoption process, it stands to reason that adoptive parents will continue along this colorblind trajectory when raising their children. Although existing research mostly supports "successful outcomes" in transracial adoptions, studies also suggest that adoptees are left to fend for themselves in matters concerning race and racism, often leaving them feeling isolated and invalidated (Samuels, 2009).

## Following the colorblind rules

Enabled by MEPA, a policy that essentially denies the salience of race by removing race as a consideration in adoptive placements without calling for states to either a) make an assessment of parents racial literacy prior to adoption in order to determine their ability to help children navigate race and racism, or b) requiring states to provide parents with some sort of education about race and the impact it will have on their children's lives, I found that parents are unwittingly reproducing this colorblind form of racism that will guarantee the continuation of the covert practices that will *oppress their own children*. Lacking a clear understanding of the ways in which centuries of oppression and discrimination shaped the institutions in society that guarantee the structural disadvantage of people with black skin, parents miss out on the opportunity to use transracial adoption as an anti-racism project and instead struggle to overcome this colorblind ideology without guidance or support from the institution that places these children into their loving arms in the first place.

In "The Ideology of Colorblindness" (2002), Guinier and Torres reference three rules of colorblind racism: 1) Race is all about skin color, 2) Talking about race is equivalent to being racist, and 3) racism is an individual problem. They go on to show how these deeply held beliefs mask the glaring racial inequalities that are present in society, such as the conditions that lead to such a disproportionate number of children of color being placed for adoption. Analyzing parents' responses, most conformed to at least one or more of Guinier and Torres three rules. Additionally, parents often contradicted themselves throughout the interview indicating that they were conflicted in

their perception of racism and their actual lived experiences and struggling to make sense of their existing ideology concerning race.

### Rule number one: Racism is all about skin color

The first rule of Guinier and Torres three rules of colorblind racism is that race is all about skin color and is not a marker for social status, history, or power; rather it is a false construction of phenotype that relies improperly on ascriptive physical identifiers of “blood” or ancestry (Guinier and Torres, 2002). When race is seen as being only about pigmentation in the skin, the benefits or negative effects that are associated with a person’s skin color are ignored.

The following quote from Amy, a 49 year-old mother of three black sons all in their teens, illustrates how a parent’s belief conforms to this first rule of colorblind racism. This quote was in response to the question of how she taught her children about race. “I told them that melanin is just a chemical underneath the skin; the skin is the same. So it’s sorta like giving them the tools to say, there is nothing different except you’ve got more chemical in you than I do.”

Throughout the interview, Amy made additional comments about skin color being the only difference between her and her children and often compared it to her own experience of growing up overweight. When asked how she thought her kids felt about race she said, “I think they might feel it just like say, a fat kid, or a kid who wears glasses might get teased. We try not to make a big deal out of it.” She goes on to say, “I tell them it doesn’t matter what you look like, there is always going to be hatred between different groups.”

Reducing race to just being about skin color denies the history of oppression and discrimination experienced by blacks in America and fails to address current inequalities. Comparing race to weight problems or wearing glasses reduces race to a cosmetic issue and obviously fails to recognize the fact that wearing glasses or having weight problems doesn’t significantly impact an individual’s life chances the way that race does.

While on one hand, Amy downplays the significance of skin color, on the other hand she confirms the salience of race by saying, “When my son had reading problems in school, maybe it was just me, but I felt like they had diminished expectations of him. Like they didn’t expect as much, maybe, because he is black.” This illuminates the contradiction I found in conversing with most of the parents, as they would initially deny having encountered racism or discrimination yet as the interview progressed they would recount several confrontations with racism. Colorblind ideology forces them to ignore these incidents or attribute discrimination to other causes. This speaks to the struggle they face in reconciling their ideas about race and racism with their actual lived experiences.

### Rule number two: Talking about racism is equivalent to being racist

Guinier and Torres second rule of colorblind racism is that recognizing race is the equivalent of holding onto unscientific notions of racial biology, claiming that recognizing race is essentially a throwback to racism of the past. In other words, recognizing race is equal to being racist. This is problematic because the failure to recognize race means judging people on individual merit without taking into consideration the historical effects of racism and societal influences such as lack of access to resources.

Holly, the mother of three adopted children ages 4, 7, and 10, when asked if we should recognize race, said:

I think we just need to pick up on our kids’ clues, you know, do they want to talk about it? I don’t know really. We still don’t need affirmative action. I think in a lot of ways, everyone needs to work for what they want. They shouldn’t just be given it because they are a minority.

Further into the interview, when asked how her children’s lives might be different if they weren’t adopted, Holly said:

I think it would be a lot more about survival. You go right to work out of high school because you have to. There are no other options. In a lot of families there is no one that’s ever gone to college, you drop out of school and go to work.

Furthermore, when asked how we explain the high rates of poverty among blacks, Holly answered, “I think it’s because they are not educated and I hate to generalize, but it’s the key to financial freedom. Maybe they don’t get the support they need so they are trapped.”

Holly's suggestion that we no longer need affirmative action ignores the persisting disparity in income and wealth between blacks and whites, assuming a level playing field with equal chances—all a person has to do is work for what they want. This illustrates Guinier and Torres second rule of racism by suggesting we no longer need these programs to make up for the hundreds of years that blacks were discriminated against and excluded from employment that would allow them to accumulate wealth at the same rates as whites. Holly's idea that everyone needs to work for what they want supports the notion that individuals should be judged on their own merit, ignoring the structural advantages or disadvantages conferred upon an individual based upon their skin color.

On one hand, Holly claims that we don't need affirmative action, yet on the other hand she points out that many blacks have no other options than to quit school in order to work. She also asserts that education is the key to financial freedom, yet according to her blacks aren't able to get an education because they have to work.

Guinier and Torres show that parents' financial contribution to their child's education is one of the strongest, if not *the* strongest influence on the outcome in children's educational achievements. But because of centuries of discrimination, blacks are unable to accumulate assets at the same rate as whites and therefore lack the ability to make those contributions. Holly fails to make the connection that parental wealth greatly influences children's educational outcome, focusing instead on how education influences income. Through her colorblind lens, Holly views a world where everyone has access to higher education. Yet her statement that blacks often have no choice other than quitting school in order to work/survive shows that she is aware that is not reality. Colorblind ideology does not permit race to be recognized as a predictor of opportunity or life chances, forcing Holly to denounce affirmative action even though she recognizes that opportunity is not equal. Additionally, while Holly opposes affirmative action, in a sense she is providing her own privatized form of affirmative action by providing wealth to insure her own children's education.

Similarly, Jessica, the mother of two biological white children ages 17 and 15, and two adopted black children ages 11 and 9, also demonstrates Guinier and Torres second rule of colorblind racism when asked if race limits what a person can accomplish:

I think that you accomplish whatever your perception thinks you can accomplish. If you let race be the reason then you won't accomplish because of your race. I think blacks probably have more opportunity in getting education when it comes to funding, scholarships, etc. They may have limited opportunities in some geographic locations but mostly they have more.

She goes on to say, "It doesn't matter what color you are, if you grow up in poverty that's what you know. It just so happens that there's a disproportionate number of minorities in the ghettos."

In Jessica's view, like Holly's, a person can accomplish whatever they set their mind to and race simply is not an issue unless you make it one. And when it comes to getting an education, Jessica feels that not only is the playing field level, but blacks now have *more* opportunities than whites. In Jessica's opinion, we shouldn't recognize race because things are now equal if not balanced in favor of blacks. It is just some accident that happens to land so many blacks in the ghettos. Yet later in the interview, when asked why there are so many black children in foster care and up for adoption, Jessica said:

Because there's a lot of babies being born to blacks. I think that you have more blacks in poverty, which leads to higher birth rates. Because of history, race has (pause) you can't say that there aren't differences. I think it's a generational paradigm that is passed on. It's an engrained thing.

Jessica, like the other adoptive parents, is influenced by colorblind ideology so strongly that she contradicts herself because on one hand she claims that accomplishment is about your perception, not your race. But on the other hand she acknowledges that history has created differences between blacks and whites leading to higher rates of poverty among blacks.

### Rule number three: Racism is an individual problem

The third rule of colorblind racism suggests is that racism is located within individuals, rather than a systemic problem within the structures of our society. As Guinier and Torres state, under this third rule of colorblind racism, it is "a psychological disease of individuals, not a social plague" and a problem of "changing people's thinking."

All but two of the parents interviewed offered stories of friends, family, or co-workers who, because of exposure to their adopted children were able to overcome some of their individual attitudes about race. Here are some of their stories:

We had my racist grandparents who, when I'd send them pictures, would plaster them all over the place and even, she kind of neglected her white grandchildren to show everybody her black grandchildren, especially when she got in the retirement home and a lot of her caregivers were African American. I think it was a real turning point for her.

My grandparents were not happy about the adoption, they live in the South. I remember calling my grandma and she acted excited, but then my grandfather told other family members "well they didn't ask us first." But you know we don't see them often but when we do they try to treat them the same as the other grandchildren. And my dad was raised in the south so I think he can't help but be a little racist, but he treats my kids good. I think maybe it's been a real turning point for him. You know, I think with every generation it gets less and less and eventually it will just go away.

Everybody in the neighborhood knows that our next door neighbor doesn't like blacks. He has always made comments about colored people. But over the years he has come to really like the girls and I think his attitude has changed just from knowing them.

We've seen a lot of people change their thinking about race and black people just from knowing our kids. I think the more people continue to inter-marry and the more normal it becomes then you'll have more and more people changing their attitudes and thinking and eventually there will be no more racism. It just takes time. But it's nice to think that we are doing our own little part in eliminating racism one person at a time.

While changing individual beliefs is desirable, these parents still see racism as only being an individual problem, which doesn't allow them to look more closely at the problem as it relates to the institutional practices that reproduce racial disadvantages. Locating the problem of racism within individuals leads to individual based solutions, or changing the hearts and minds of society one person at a time while ignoring the mechanisms of society that prevent minorities from gaining social mobility. This line of thinking suggests that if these individuals would just come around in their thinking, racial inequality would cease to exist.

## Looking through a colorblind lens

In addition to parents overwhelmingly fitting into Guinier and Torres three rules of colorblind racism, I also found that a majority of them conformed to the parental behavior reported by adult adoptees in Samuels study, as they failed to recognize incidents as being racist or discriminatory and often seemed to be looking for reasons to *not* see things as being race based. Having never experienced racism and the disadvantages of having black skin in our society, parents fail to notice things such as avoidance when a white couple crosses the street to walk on the other side when a black male approaches, or rejection such as poor service in a restaurant (Feagin, 1991). As Feagin points out, black Americans are more likely to evaluate a situation carefully before judging it based on their lifetime of experiences, something white parents are unable to do. Instead, parents seemed to try to justify discrimination or search for reasons that something was *not* about race, as the following quotes demonstrate:

I do worry about when they begin to date, but I think people are pretty open minded. I really do. Sometimes I think people just don't like each other, or maybe it was that the parents didn't want her to have a boyfriend—not because he's black, you just don't know if its skin color or a million other things and I think sometimes people just look for that.

My son, I think he just doesn't like to think that someone just doesn't like him. He'd rather say it's because he's black.

The only thing that we've had happen, and I don't really think this was racist, was a kid not wanting to play with him on the playground because 'he's different'. He might have said the same thing about a red headed kid, you know?

In addition to denying that incidents were racist, several parents indicated that in questionable situations they were reluctant to bring the event to anyone's attention as possibly being racist. These incidents may have registered differently if parents had a more developed racial consciousness since they lack a lifetime of experience with racism that black parents would have. Instead, these events are swept under the rug when they could be used as opportunities to implement anti-racism practices and teach their children how to recognize and handle those situations.

Parents also expressed a fear that talking about race would lead to their children "having a chip on their shoulder" and a few felt that their child had already developed one. The parents of children who felt they already had a "chip on their shoulder" couldn't explain why the child might have developed this heightened sense of racial injustice and reasoned that it must be a cry for attention, rather than giving any weight to what their children were saying.

Failure to address the racial aspects of these incidents embodies all three rules of Guinier and Torres explanation of colorblind ideology. First, parents view race as only about skin color, rather than recognizing its significance; second their reluctance to bring up race conforms to rule number two; and lastly, failure to recognize the connection between incidents of racism and privilege in our society falls under rule number three. The grip of colorblind ideology is so strong that parents not only fail to see things as being about race, but also search for reasons to define them as being about anything *but* race.

## Toward a transformation

Although parents overwhelmingly demonstrated a colorblind ideology, they also expressed a desire for a better understanding of race. The experience, although not a transformative one, created openings for some racialized experiences within the contradictions of the dominant ideology. Many wished they had been better prepared or had an idea of what to expect and all of them would have liked access to resources to help them better parent their black children. I found that the more experienced parents were far less colorblind, suggesting that as their children grew and had different experiences, their understanding of race shifted as well. Perhaps there comes a point where incidents of racism can no longer be ignored, forcing parents to confront racism.

Twine (2004), in her whiteness studies, shows how white people can develop racial literacy by taking note of their whiteness and the benefits society confers upon them simply because of their skin color. Although the parents I interviewed are reproducing colorblind racism, there are indications that they are shifting toward racial consciousness by acknowledging the benefits their children receive from having white parents, as Amy did in the following quote:

I've seen people who look at my kids and I could see that they are sort of not treating them badly but just differently and then I'll come in and they'll realize I'm their mother and they'll say Oh, they are LIKE white people. They aren't *really* black; they are more like white people. They'll exhale and let their guard down.

In this instance, Amy was describing an interaction with a store clerk at the mall. She acknowledges the protective quality of her Whiteness and how it is used to "vouch" for her children as being white by association. Her children are afforded the privilege of not being scrutinized so closely by the clerk once her Whiteness is brought into play. This incident was not mentioned when I asked about specific events that were racist, which again highlights the contradiction between parents perception and their lived experiences. At the same time it is a positive step away from colorblind racism. Recognizing the advantages of her whiteness may be the first step toward racial literacy for Amy.

## Conclusion

Studies on transracial adoption have shown that the adoptive children do not fare any worse than same race adopted children (Simon, 1998 and Silverman 1993), however the adoptees do struggle with identity development. In a study by Gina Samuels, multiracial adults who had been adopted by white families reported feeling racially alienated and struggling to come to terms with their own racialized existence. Being raised in a "race neutral" environment where racial incidents were downplayed caused many adoptees to feel estranged from their parents, disconnected from their race and left them ill equipped to navigate their experiences in a racialized society. Parents in the present study, enabled by the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act, appear to be employing similar colorblind



parenting strategies that will likely have the same outcome of children who struggle to reconcile their lived experience with the worldview of their parents.

The history of race relations in the United States leaves a legacy of very real consequences for these children of color that cannot be overcome simply by being raised in a white family. Enabled and empowered by MEPA, couples who are eager to love a child are thrust into parenthood with little preparation for dealing with such a complex issue as race. As Twine suggests, the family can be viewed as a site where competing racial projects are negotiated. Transracial adoptive families should be an ideal site for anti-racist practices; however because of the state's failure to follow MEPA with laws mandating both racial training and the need for resources for these adoptive families, instead they become sites that perpetuate colorblind racism which insures the continuance of racism and oppression.

This study provides evidence of the colorblind ideology that overwhelmingly exists in a group of adoptive parents, supporting previous scholar's suggestions that call for transracial adoption policy mandating racial education for those who wish to adopt children of a different race or ethnicity from their own. Additionally, post-adoption support in the form of organized support groups would benefit adoptive families.

Future research in the form of longitudinal studies incorporating both the parents and adult transracial adoptees perspectives might explore how parent's ideologies transform over time or follow the process of developing a critical lens through which to analyze race. As Twine points out, "analysis of how they informally train their children to negotiate and/or challenge racial boundaries provides critical race theorists and sociologists with insights into how white people conceptualize blackness, whiteness and anti-racism as the intimates of blacks."

## References

- [1] Babbie, Earl R. *The Practice of Social Research*. Belmont: Wadsworth Pub. Co, 1995.
- [2] Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo and Lewis, Amanda. "I Did Not Get that Job Because of a Black Man...": The Story Lines and Testimonies of Color-Blind Racism." *Sociological Forum*, Dec2004, Vol. 19 Issue 4, p555-581, 27p.
- [3] de Haymes, Maria Vidal, and Shirley Simon. "Transracial Adoption: Families Identify Issues and Needed Support Services." *Child Welfare* 82 2 (2003): 251-72.
- [4] DellaCava, Frances A (12/2004). "Adoption in the U.S.: The Emergence of a Social Movement." *Journal of sociology and social welfare* (0191-5096), 31 (4), p. 141.
- [5] Dorow, Sara. "Racialized Choices: Chinese Adoption and the 'White Noise' of Blackness." *Critical Sociology* 32.2-3 (2006): n. page. Sage Publications. Web. 3 Nov. 2009.
- [6] Fogg-Davis, Hawley. *The Ethics of Transracial Adoption*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002.
- [7] Goldberg, Abbie E. "Lesbian and Heterosexual Preadoptive Couples' Openness to Transracial Adoption." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 79 1 (2009): 103-17.
- [8] Guinier, Lani and Torres, Gerald. "The Ideology of Colorblindness." *The Miner's Canary: Enlisting Race, Resisting Power, Transforming Democracy*, pp. 38-39, 42-48. Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press 2002.
- [9] Hansen, Mary, and Rita Simon. "Transracial Placement in Adoptions with Public Agency Involvement: What We Can Learn from the AFCARS Data." *Adoption Quarterly* 8.2 (2004): n. pag. Haworth Press Inc. Web. 16 Oct. 2009.
- [10] Hollingsworth, Leslie D (09/1999). "Symbolic Interactionism, African American Families, and the Transracial Adoption Controversy." *Social work (New York)* (0037-8046), 44 (5), p. 443.
- [11] Jennings, Patricia. "The Trouble with the Multiethnic Placement Act." *Sociological Perspectives* 49.4 559: 559.
- [12] Mapp, Susan C (07/01/2008). "Evidence-Based Practice or Practice-Based Evidence: What Is Happening With MEPA and Current Adoption Practices? Families in society (1044-3894), 89 (3), p. 5.
- [13] Patton-Imani, Sandra (12/2002). "Redefining the Ethics of Adoption, Race, Gender, and Class." *Law & society review* (0023-9216), 36 (4), p. 813.
- [14] Quiroz, Pamela. "From race matching to transracial adoption: Race and the changing discourse of US adoption." *Critical Discourse Studies* 5.3 (2008): 249. Academic Search Premier. Web. 6 Oct. 2009.
- [15] Samuels, Gina. "Being Raised by White People: Navigating Racial Difference Among Adopted Multiracial Adults." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 71 (2009): 80-94. EBSCO. Web. 25 Oct. 2009.
- [16] Silverman, Arnold R (04/1993). "Outcomes of Transracial Adoption." *The Future of Children* (1054-8289), 3 (1), p. 104.
- [17] Simon, Rita J (04/1998). "Adoption and the Race Factor: How Important Is It?" *Sociological inquiry* (0038-0245), 68 (2), p. 274.
- [18] Twine, France Winddance; Gallagher, Charles. "The future of whiteness: A map of the 'third wave'" *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31.1 (2008). 07 Dec. 2009.
- [19] Twine, France Winddance. "A white side of black Britain: The concept of racial literacy" *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 27.6 (2004). 07 Dec. 2009.
- [20] Twine, France Winddance, and A. Steinbugler. "The Gap Between Whites and Whiteness: Interracial Intimacy and Racial Literacy." *Du Bois Review* 3.2 (2006): 341-363. ProQuest Central, ProQuest. Web. 7 Dec. 2009.
- [21] Twine, France Winddance. "Transracial mothering and antiracism: The case of white birth mothers of 'Black' children in Britain." *Feminist Studies* 25.3 (1999): 729-748. ProQuest Central, ProQuest. Web. 7 Dec. 2009.
- [22] Tuan, Mia. "Domestic and International Transracial Adoption: A synopsis of the Literature." *Sociology Compass* 2/6.10.11111 (2008): 1848-1859. EBSCO. Web. 10 Oct. 2009.