Real Brothers, Real Sisters:
Learning From the White Siblings of Transracial Adoptees

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This article reports the findings of a qualitative study of twelve non-adopted White siblings of transracial adoptees. It discusses various responses among White siblings to the adoption of children of color by their White biological parents. Drawing on sociolinguistic understandings of social practices and identities as enacted through constitutive discourses, the study paid particular attention to the ways study participants engaged with the discourses of race and adoption. Using the narrative analysis methodology developed by Wortham (2000), various kinds of selves were analyzed in transcripts of interviews about the participants’ experiences with transracial adoption. Of particular educational value are those selves described as transracialized, through which a few of the non-adopted White siblings demonstrated unpredictable and innovative ways of “doing” White identities, based largely on ongoing caring relationships with people of color outside the family. Whether transracialized or not transracialized, all of the study participants revealed feelings of affection for and compassion towards their adopted siblings, who through the act of legal adoption arguably became their “real” brothers and sisters, despite frequently expressed ambivalence about transracial adoption as a social practice. This ambivalence among the non-adopted White siblings derived from the ongoing challenges faced by various members of transracial families, adopted and non-adopted alike, and from the lack of social supports needed by such families.

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In a recent study of White adults raised in families in which both adopted and biological children were present, I interviewed individuals who were the non-adopted siblings of transracial adoptees (Raible, 2005). In this paper I sought to expand the terms of the ongoing controversy surrounding transracial adoption by shifting the gaze of researchers from adoptees and their White adoptive parents to the non-adopted White siblings in such families. Some in the adoption community have deemed these non-adopted siblings the "invisible children," because their experiences and needs until recently have been largely overlooked, for example, in the research literature on transracial adoption and at adoption conferences, culture camps, and other venues that purport to provide pre- and post-adoption services. This article draws from my doctoral dissertation research to document empirically the experiences of non-adopted White study participants who share family ties with adopted siblings of color. Transcending lines of race, culture, and even biology, these siblings for the most part affirmed their adoptive siblings as their "real" brothers and sisters, even as some of them described an ambivalent view of transracial adoption as a social practice.

As a self-described lifelong participant-observer in the transracial adoption "experiment," let me begin by asserting that I am not opposed to transracial adoption per se. However, as the biracial parent of African American sons adopted from foster care, as an adult transracial adoptee who was raised in a predominantly White environment, and as a multicultural educator and educational researcher, I do share a view of adoption itself, as more and more scholars do, as presenting an interesting set of contradictions and problems that warrant closer attention from multiple, interdisciplinary perspectives (Adams, 2002; Fogg-Davis, 2002; Melosh, 2002; Patton, 2000; Simon & Roorda, 2000; Trenka, Oparah, & Shin, 2006). Despite ongoing unresolved issues in the way transracial adoption is practiced, I nevertheless
see value in the placement of children of one race with parents of another race or culture. At the same time, I also value legislation such as the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978, since the Act requires social workers to show how transracial adoption might become a viable option for individual Native children, but only after other conditions have been met and when each placement has been considered on a case-by-case basis, always with the intent of keeping extended families and tribal communities connected (Stark & Stark, 2006). Such legislation reminds child welfare professionals, policy decision makers, researchers, and other interested parties that there is much more to domestic transracial adoption than simply rescuing children who are described axiomatically by pro-transracial adoption advocates as languishing in foster care (for cogent analyses of the complexity of transracial adoption issues, see Adelson, 2006; Barry, 2006; Briggs, 2006; Harris, 2006; Raible, 2006). Similarly, there is more to international adoption (which often overlaps with transracial adoption) than saving so-called “orphans” from poverty or war-ravaged conditions overseas (Hubinette, 2006; Kim, J. R., 2006; Nelson, 2006; Trenka et al., 2006).

I would never claim that this relatively small study is the last word on the non-adopted sibling experience of transracial family life. Actually, I view it as one of the first academic treatments of the topic, and one that can be built on by future researchers. As readers are probably aware, many of the early studies of transracial and international adoption focused on adoptees and how adoptees “turn out” (Johnson, Shireman, & Watson, 1987; McRoy & Zurcher, 1983; Simon, Alstein, & Melli, 1994; Zastrow, 1977): Is our self-esteem okay? Are our racial identities intact? Are we really any different from non-adopted children or those placed in same-race adoptions? Moreover, most researchers who have studied transracial adoption have based their findings on interviews and surveys of parents, and with adoptees while they were still
quite young. While this is gradually changing as more recent studies are added to the literature, few researchers have focused on the experience of mature adoptees in adulthood. Even more noticeably absent from the literature are the voices and experiences of those other unwitting participants in the experiment, the “invisible” brothers and sisters who, due to their parents’ decisions, found themselves sharing families with adopted boys and girls from a different race or culture.

**Research design and study participants**

I set about to understand what transracial adoption means in the lives of non-adopted White siblings, borrowing tools from sociolinguistics (Gee, 1999; Pennycook, 2000) and viewing identity less as a fixed essence and more as a discursive process, and through a sociocultural lens (Dolby, 2000; Gee, Allen, & Clinton, 2001; Yon, 2000). What sense do White siblings make of the two constitutive discourses informing transracial adoption, namely, race and adoption? How did growing up with diversity in the family influence their identities as White individuals? Drawing on a theoretical orientation to racial and other identities as constructed interactionally and situationally through discourse (Gee et al., 2001; Giroux, 1999; Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997; Yon, 2000), I adapted an approach to the analysis of autobiographical narratives (Wortham, 2001) because I sought to understand the ways White siblings used discourse to fashion their sense of self (i.e., their identities) through discourse, including language in use (Gee, 1999). Beginning with the assumption that all social practices—including transracial adoption—are embedded within and enacted through discourses (Gee, 1999; Pennycook, 2000), my doctoral dissertation research attempted to document the ways in which the discourses of race and adoption interact to create the discourse of transracial adoption. Because discourses (including race and adoption) influence family dynamics
and individual identities, the study investigated how family members interact with and participate in such discourses, and what that participation reveals specifically about individual identities as White members of transracial adoptive families. As an educational researcher who conducts primarily interpretive research, I was much more concerned with gathering data from a representative but selective sample of sibling experiences. I intentionally strove for richness of data and depth of understanding, and by design, was less concerned with quantity, statistical analyses, or generalizability. Rather than setting out to prove or disprove a pre-formed hypothesis, my goal in conducting this qualitative study was to capture the lived sibling experience of transracial adoption in richly textured, evocative ways (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

The twelve adult participants in my study ranged in age from twenty-one to forty-nine. These volunteers were found via contacts throughout the networked community of adoption in the United States. From colleagues and associates across the country, I solicited the names of adults, rather than adolescents or children, because I sought to hear from older siblings who could reflect on their childhood and adolescent years with a more distanced perspective. I limited my choice of participants to White individuals who grew up in the United States in order to avoid the complications of competing issues. For example, I intentionally excluded non-adopted siblings from families headed by parents of two different races or that had lived abroad for some part of the children’s formative years.

As it turned out, all of the participants in this study had brothers or sisters who were African American (including biracial) domestic adoptees or international adoptees born in Korea. In this way, they represent the majority of transracial adoptive families formed roughly between 1960 and the early 1980s. These families also reflect the geographic diversity of the continental
United States, some having lived on the eastern seaboard, others from the West Coast or Midwest. While most could be characterized socio-economically as solidly middle to upper middle class, participant diversity was further reflected in that certain individuals had been raised in cities, while others grew up in suburbia or even in rural locales.

I drew on the methodology of in-depth interviewing developed by Seidman (1998) and the sociolinguistic tools of narrative analysis and discourse analysis in an effort to gather stories that documented participants' various lived experiences. Narrative analysis, particularly the methodology of Wortham (2001) provided insight into the multiple identities or kinds of selves enacted as individual participants constructed autobiographical narratives about their experience with transracial adoption. Each interview was transcribed and then analyzed discursively to develop vignettes (Seidman, 1998) about race and adoption. During a second round of analysis, the vignettes were analyzed using Wortham's (2001) narrative analysis methodology to uncover the selves enacted during our conversations together.

I proceeded by asking each participant the same series of sixty questions during interviews that lasted between one to two hours. My questions were designed to be open-ended, although I did try to ensure that they covered certain topics, including interracial dating and friendships, and whether or not participants have considered adopting in adulthood, transracially or otherwise. Samples of these questions are as follows:

- Can you describe your dating history? (Whom have you partnered with?)
- Did other people ever ask you about your adopted brother/sister(s)?
- Are there any issues you personally have had to face because of your parents' decision to adopt?
- Can you tell me about a time when extended family members talked about adoption, either positively or negatively?
- Can you tell me about times when the topic of adoption came up
in school or with acquaintances?
- Can you tell me about a time when you had to deal with other people’s curiosity about the racial differences in your family?
- Can you think of anything families should do intentionally if they are going to raise children of different races together?
- Can you tell me about times when you felt different or special because your family included adopted children?
- Where do you feel comfortable socializing (racially)? How about your siblings?
- How prepared do you think your family was to deal with adoption and race issues?
- How important do you feel adoption issues are to different members of your family?
- Can you tell me about times when the topic of adoption came up in school or with acquaintances?
- Have you considered adopting?
- How has your thinking about transracial adoption changed over the years?

Toward the end of each interview, I asked participants to describe a successful and unsuccessful transracial adoption, and then how successful they thought the adoption in their own family had been. I also solicited participants’ views on the transracial adoption controversy. In addition, I inquired into their personal comfort level with diversity, how knowledgeable they felt about adoption and racial issues, and what advice they had for families considering transracial adoption.

I disclosed at the start of each interview that I am a transracial adoptee as well as an adoptive parent. Some of the participants I knew personally beforehand, while most I had never met. In two cases, I knew the participant’s adopted brother or sister, and for this reason, I found it particularly interesting to hear how the adoption played out from their own perspective as a non-adopted White sibling.
Findings

Learning from the siblings of transracial adoptees

What did these White siblings say about their parents’ decision to adopt a child of another race or culture? Most reported that they see in hindsight that parents, to use one participant’s phrase, “didn’t really know what they were getting themselves into.” While two of the twelve reported that their parents had participated in a group for adoptive families, most of these families were naively taking on this tremendous responsibility on their own with few social supports. Whereas a few families did actually relocate to more diverse, cosmopolitan cities for the sake of the children, the majority resided in predominantly White suburban or rural environments. Some participants had been raised with a color-blind “love sees no color” approach, while others realized fairly early on that race and culture still matter, at least to many people outside the family, and sometimes even to various members within the extended family. Almost all of the participants had stories to tell, for example, about insensitive comments from extended family members and the different ways their parents dealt with them.

As a multicultural educator, what I found most interesting were the stories that showed instances of personal connection to larger discourses of race and cultural pluralism, and to real people of color outside the family. I was fascinated to hear how some of the siblings took up the discourse of antiracism, for instance, whereas others tended to avoid or downplay discussions of race or cultural differences. It became clear that for the few non-adopted siblings who did embark on a serious learning quest to understand race, racism, and the role of cultural differences, there had been help and modeling from their savvy parents early on. Perhaps more importantly, this subset of sibling participants was able to forge personal connections to people of color outside the family. Such long-term connections came about through their involvement
in interracial churches and youth groups, by becoming friends with people of color at school and at work, and in some cases, through romantic involvements and dating across the color line. Their involvement in long-term relationships of caring with people of color enabled these White adults to develop more nuanced and sophisticated understandings of the dynamics of race in our society, and a deeper appreciation for struggles against racism, both in history and in the lives of their adopted siblings, and ultimately, in their own lives. For example, they talked about coming to understand “White privilege” (McIntosh, 1988) and how they felt called to confront racism as adults. They described the ways they handled questions from curious onlookers, and how they educated others on the use of culturally appropriate and adoption-sensitive language. Rather than denying the existence of racism or trivializing racial incidents as few and far between, these siblings didn’t abandon their adoptive sisters and brothers to their own private struggles; instead, they committed to learning about racism and cultural differences as race-conscious, culturally aware, anti-racist allies (Raible, 1994). Race, culture, and adoption became their issues. Some participants have moved, as adults, to multicultural neighborhoods and have chosen diverse work sites. Others have traveled—in some cases, more than once—to Asia or to Africa. To paraphrase one participant, who has an African American sister and a biracial brother, “If it’s an offense against my brother or sister, it’s an offense against me.”

An important observation (although hardly surprising) was that the majority of the non-adopted siblings interviewed did not seem overly concerned about anti-racist struggle or invested in understanding diversity issues. On the flip side, I was often quite moved by the ways that all of the participants described their relationships with their adoptive brothers and sisters in affectionate and compassionate terms. What I am interested in highlighting here are the lessons from those few siblings who did take up
anti-racism as their own issue, and how doing so transformed their identities as White adults.

What impressed me most—and from whom I think we can perhaps learn the most—were the four non-adopted siblings who, during their interviews, narrated unusually sophisticated understandings of racial and cultural issues. I refer to the complicated narrative identities enacted by these siblings as examples of transracialized selves. That is, the ways in which these White adults narrated their experiences revealed innovative and creative approaches to Whiteness, ways that, I would argue, break from more traditional and predictable ways of being White or performing Whiteness (cf. Derman-Spark & Phillips, 1997; Dolby, 2000; Howard, 1999; McIntosh, 1988; McIntyre, 1997). It seems to me that these siblings are saying, in so many words, that if their idealistic parents taught them that people are equal regardless of race, and if racial mixing is a good thing within the family, by extension racial mixing outside the family should naturally follow as a matter of course. In effect, these siblings willingly shouldered social responsibility and attempted to fulfill utopian visions of the integrated, beloved community espoused by religious leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. They have much to teach us about what happened to them in the process.

To begin with, all the non-adopted siblings in this study experienced what I call “sharing the spotlight” with their adoptive brothers and sisters. That is, they reflected on how uncomfortable they often felt when they appeared in public as a family and noticed the curious and sometimes hostile stares from onlookers. In various ways, they talked about how they withstood the scrutiny of being on public display as an unusual, racially marked family. As a group, they also had much to report on the intrusive questions and comments from friends and schoolmates and even from strangers unknown to the family. For example, they fielded questions such as, “Is that your real sister?” “How much
did she cost?" “Why are you different colors?” and “What happened to her real parents?” and so on.

Some of the siblings disclosed how, as adults, they are cautious about identifying themselves as members of transracial families. They have learned that people—even complete strangers—are not shy about voicing their strong opinions about their parents’ decision to form a family by taking in “other people’s children” (Delpit, 1995). For example, many people are quick to make assumptions about how these siblings must think about race and the ongoing transracial adoption controversy. The siblings who move in multicultural social circles talked about how they take special care when disclosing that they have an adopted brother or sister of color. They described how they have learned to anticipate that people frequently have strong reactions (both positive and negative) to this news. Nearly all of the participants talked about the racist comments and jokes they are subjected to and privy to; as Whites, apparently they are expected to join in or share racist sentiments (see Sleeter, 1993 for an insider’s discussion of the ways Whites interact with each other, and how these interactions help to maintain racism, even among individuals who do not think of themselves as racist). Some of the White siblings in this study responded by telling the racist commentator that they are offended and that their brother or sister is a member of the group just slandered or ridiculed. Others described how they have had to become more strategic about deciding when to fight back, when to educate, and when to let comments slide.

Perhaps the most telling and poignant comments came from the siblings who had at some point been involved in dating across the color line. One participant, whose parents tended to downplay discussions of racial differences in the family, described how, as a teenager, she had been attracted to a Black classmate at school. Yet she felt paralyzed, saying that, “I didn’t know what to do with this.” She described feeling that she had no one to
talk to about her confusing emotions. Her parents had done a commendable job instilling democratic values about accepting everyone as equals, yet she sensed intuitively that other people would react to her choice—and she felt isolated, with no one to talk to about her feelings.

Other participants described how frustrating it was for them to be involved romantically with someone of another race. Dealing with the harsh judgments from others, whether in the African American community or the White community, for instance, proved to be emotionally draining and disheartening. Being always on display as half of an interracial couple led one woman to observe that this is precisely why she would never adopt transracially herself. She explained that since she knows firsthand how it feels to be forever in the public eye, she believed that if she herself found it challenging as an adult, it would be far too much of a burden to impose on a small child. Interestingly, at the time of the interviews, only one sibling was currently in an interracial romantic relationship; all the others who had been involved previously had pulled back, citing various reasons.

Other participants who explained why they would not adopt a child of another race attributed their decision to the heart-wrenching struggles their families had faced. Seeing brothers in jail, living with the consequences of unaddressed mental health issues, experiencing estrangement and disruptions in the family, and witnessing the ongoing challenges faced by their adoptive siblings of color led a number of participants to voice ambivalence about transracial adoption. That is, they all expressed love and concern for their adopted siblings and gratitude for the enriching experience of growing up in transracial adoptive families, even as they reported the difficulties confronting various members of their own families. Some were careful to point out how their adopted sibling was “better off” than had he or she never been adopted.

Continuing on the negative side, several participants described
ongoing tensions between their adopted siblings and their parents and the heartbreak this has caused for everyone in the family, even as family members have moved into maturity. One woman described being at an adoption conference and becoming uncomfortable with and even appalled by the dismissive statements uttered by pre- and post-adoptive parents in attendance, who, in her view, resisted what the adult adoptees and other presenters of color had to teach them. She asserted that she would never be like them, if she were to adopt transracially in the future.

On the other hand, a few participants expressed optimism about transracial adoption specifically and adoption in general, for instance, explaining how they would certainly be open to adopting children in the future. One father reported that he had adopted already, but not a child of color. Another sibling participant was raising several adopted African American children, while yet another was in the process of completing a home study with the intention of adopting a Black or biracial child.

*Lessons of transracialized siblings*

What the combined voices of this group of non-adopted White siblings suggest is that we, as a society, have not yet figured out how to effectively support transracial adoptive families, much less integrate our social networks and institutions. Moreover, we have failed to adequately prepare the courageous family members who have attempted to embody utopian democratic values by taking on the complexities of race and adoption in their own lived experience. It occurs to me that these families, formed as they were on the waves of post-World War Two idealism and futuristic optimism (Melosh, 2003), have now been left rudderless and directionless. Our once idealistic leaders who, for a brief, beautiful historic moment, championed Martin Luther King’s vision of the integrated, beloved community have now retreated from those once lofty
ideals. In many ways, we are more conservative, less trusting, and more jaded and divided than when the transracial adoption experiment first began. Fifty years after Brown vs. Board of Education, many schools remain as segregated as ever (Berliner, 2006). Too many people still exist in monocultural enclaves where they rarely, if ever, encounter diversity in their daily lives. Far too many adoptees wind up living in isolation, feeling removed from and abandoned by the very people they should be able to count on for support in the face of tough issues pertaining not only to racial and cultural differences, but also to adoption itself (see Raible, 2006).

Yet despite these sobering circumstances, non-adopted siblings who have successfully transracialized their lives point the way forward. All of the participants in this study remarked at some point on how lucky they feel to be part of their transracial adoptive families. One woman, in articulating how different she feels from other Whites, observed, “My experience stands for something. I am part of the transracial adoptive culture, but what does that mean to someone who hasn’t experienced that?” Another described how her life has been enriched in so many ways, and how her current work in an African American community and her adoption of Black children as a parent is a direct outgrowth of her childhood experiences and what she has learned over time from her parents, her African American siblings, and perhaps most importantly, her adult friends of color. Transracialized siblings teach us that genuine integration is by no means easy, but the rewards far outweigh the perceived risks.

Transracialized siblings such as these participants inspire me to persevere, to cling to the hope that adoptive families can learn to get it right. The four transracialized siblings in this study represent White individuals who demonstrably “get it” when it comes to understanding race and racism. Moreover, they symbolize how each of us can figure out a way forward through
the dismal minefields of racial mistrust. I argue not only that we can, but rather that we must, if indeed we are to finally complete the unfinished project of racial integration. If transracialized siblings can figure out how to integrate their lives, then others can, too. Where one individual has made a way, others can surely follow. Too many of us remain idly and passively on the sidelines of racial discourse and the culture wars, while these courageous individuals have jumped headlong into the fray. In essence, they embody Martin Luther King’s utopian dream, despite little social support or validation.

I suggest that we learn from the transracialized White siblings of transracial adoptees a new approach to integration and a fresh orientation to race relations. Instead of naïve color-blindness, White members of transracial families can learn how to cultivate a color-conscious anti-racism that pays attention to differences and actively monitors what is happening in the daily lives of their kin of color. At the same time, White members of interracial families can learn from friends of color outside the family. It is imperative that we take up the challenge of understanding race as individuals and how it plays out in our own lives, as these transracialized siblings have done.

**Concluding comments**

I have come to the conclusion that transracial adoptive family life can pave a way to a brighter and more racially integrated future—but only if transracial adoption is approached ethically and responsibly. The insights gleaned from the experience of non-adopted White siblings illuminate many of the issues that are now understood as fundamental to the preparation of families for this tricky, albeit worthwhile, social experiment. To summarize what I have learned from the non-adopted White siblings of transracial adoptees: (1) Very few individuals make conscious decisions to transracialize their lives, while most opt not to. Yet it is never too late to make another
choice. Each of us carries the potential to break out of the boundaries imposed by racialization to establish caring relationships with people of other racial and cultural backgrounds. (2) Whether individuals do or don't transracialize their lives and identities it has a direct bearing on whether society can be transformed by mitigating the influence of enduring racism. Finally, (3) it is important not to avoid uncomfortable discussions of adoption, race, and cultural differences within families, but to embrace those issues as our own as empathetic and compassionate real sisters and brothers. These are the lessons I have learned from listening to the White women and men who stand in loving solidarity with their adopted siblings of color.
References


