The publication of a new follow-up study of a transracial sample deserves special attention because the volume of longitudinal research in this field is fairly small. Alan Rushton and Helen Minnis provide a critical review of a recent North American paper by Brooks and Barth, and consider the quality of the evidence presented, the methodological limitations, what can be safely concluded from the study and the implications that can be drawn for practice in the UK. The reviewers conclude that the nature of these placements, the loss to follow-up and weakness of some of the measures inevitably restrict drawing firm conclusions, and readers should be aware that the researchers may have presented an over-optimistic view of placement outcome. However, the study broadly confirms the findings derived from other transracial samples that placement matching for race may not be the strongest predictor of outcome and that transracial placements do not necessarily preclude the achievement of a secure ethnic identity.

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Key words: transracial placement, adoption, follow-up, outcome, identity

A new longitudinal study in context
As views about the advisability of making transracial placements continue to divide opinion, it is imperative to be aware of the accumulating research findings, particularly those which derive from samples followed over a long period. The paper by Brooks and Barth (1999) entitled ‘Adult transracial and inracial adoptees’ will be reviewed here in some detail given that only about a dozen such studies have been conducted. Of the recently published follow-ups based on, or including transracial placements, both in the USA (eg Simon and Altstein, 1987; Barth and Berry, 1988) and the UK (eg Bagley, 1993; Charles et al, 1992), none have follow-ups extending into adulthood. The publication of a new, long-term follow-up is therefore a fairly rare occurrence and this article acknowledges the major research effort involved and the considerable methodological challenges that had to be tackled. Although there have been concerns about the alleged bias and superficiality of research into transracial placement outcomes (Kirton and Woodger, 1999), it is far preferable, we believe, to review any new evidence carefully rather than be drawn to the extremes of outright dismissal or, conversely, uncritical acceptance.

Before moving to the details of this new study, we will restate the findings of our comprehensive review on the outcomes of transracial placements (Rushton and Minnis, 1997). Having appraised the available UK and USA studies, we concluded that breakdown rates seem to be determined by age rather than type of placement (ie transracial versus same-race) and that developmental outcomes of transracially placed children appear to be good for the majority in terms of educational attainment, peer relations and behaviour. We argued that methodological flaws in most of the studies preclude definite conclusions. We pointed out a lack of longer-term follow-ups which could deliver a more comprehensive view of outcome and a lack of adequate measures of the key concepts pertinent to understanding the experience of growing up in a different race family. Samples tended to be selected from agencies specialising in transracial placement leading to potential selection bias. In addition, loss to follow-up in the research samples can lead to a falsely rosy picture. The existing research did not allow firm conclusions on racial identification as sample sizes were small and a variety of different tests was used.

The new study
The Brooks and Barth study is a continuing American study of over 700 early placements (the children being two years old on average at adoption). The placements were first examined in 1977 and again in 1980 (Feigelman and
Silverman, 1984). This, the third wave of the study, is a 17-year follow-up of the sample of adopted people who were in their 20s at the time. An innovation of the Brooks and Barth study is that it attempts to tackle head on some of the major hurdles in the field and we summarise here the key aims.

Study aims

- to capitalise on the collection of initial data on a large number of intercountry placements (which in effect means trans-racial) and to make a comparison of their progress with a white, US-born sample;
- to collect systematic, prospective data on the sample beyond childhood and adolescence into young adulthood, thus making it possible to answer questions about the effects of the placements more satisfactorily than with cross-sectional designs;
- to extend the assessment of outcome beyond the use of limited checklists of psycho-social adjustment to concepts like the strength of ethno-cultural identity;
- to test whether the inevitable loss to follow-up over 17 years has biased the sample.

Design and findings

The paper begins from the standpoint that previous studies had painted no clear picture as to whether transracial adoption is detrimental to children’s adjustment and overall well-being; it attempts to address some of the limitations of earlier research. The study followed, for nearly two decades, 144 Asian (mainly Korean and Vietnamese), 39 African-American and 41 white children, all of whom were adopted by white parents. As far as possible, differences in pre-adoptive experiences were taken into account by the researchers. The original study used both random and purposive sampling, with a view to including as many transracially adopting families as possible. The sampling frame included membership lists of adoptive parents’ organisations specialising in transracial placements. US-born white and African-American adoptees were included for comparison. Questionnaires were mailed to 1,121 families and there was a 66 per cent response rate. There was a follow-up study conducted in 1980 in which 372 families returned questionnaires. The current sample of 224 families represents one in five (19.9 per cent) of those originally eligible for the study.

The survey asked adoptive parents about demographic characteristics of the child and adoptive family, the child’s educational attainment, absconding from home, emotional problems, drugs, alcohol and trouble with the law. Participants also completed a Global Assessment Scale (GAS) (Schaffer et al., 1983) which has ten descriptive categories suggesting levels of functioning in the last year. The variables considered by the authors to be the most important indicators of problem adjustment were converted into ‘yes, no’ variables with a value of 1 if problem adjustment was indicated and 0 if not, except that a value of 2 was assigned for a GAS score of 80 or less, seeing a counsellor for emotional problems and experience of drug or alcohol problems. All values were added to produce an adjustment summary score ranging from 0 to 11, with lower scores representing fewer problems. This score was then grouped into: 0–3, good adjustment; 4–7, problem adjustment; and 8+, poor adjustment.

An ‘ethnoracial identity score’ was also created by summing responses from four items which assessed the children’s reported discomfort over their appearance and their pride, shame or embarrassment in their ethnoracial group. This scale was similarly collapsed into categories of ‘weak’, ‘secure’ or ‘strong’ ethnoracial identification. Regression analysis was used to control for children’s characteristics in the analysis of adjustment and ethnoracial identity scores. In addition to these traditional forms of analysis, the authors attempted to test whether families with ‘better’ outcomes are more likely to have remained in the longitudinal study. To do this, they looked for associations between family characteristics in the original sample and continuation in the study. They found that parents who reported that their children rarely had growth or physical problems in the earlier
waves of the study were significantly more likely to take part in the current wave than those whose children sometimes or often had such problems. No associations were found with ethnoracial background or emotional problems in the child.

As a group, the adopted people appeared to be well-adjusted young adults, with females typically exhibiting fewer problems, but with few differences between ethnoracial groups. White males were more likely to have been expelled from school and both white and African-American males had significantly lower educational achievement and GAS scores, and were more likely to have had problems with drugs, alcohol or the law compared to the females and Asian intercountry adoptees. African-American females were significantly less likely to have displayed discomfort over their appearance and more likely to have expressed pride in their ethnoracial group compared to the other transracial adoptees. However, African-American females were also more likely to have been heard making negative comments about others of the same ethnoracial group. None of the young people were classified as having a ‘weak’ racial identity and there were no significant differences between the groups using this composite scale. Good adjustment was associated with being Asian and being male while poor adjustment was associated with being white and having been placed alone in families or with families who already had children.

Focus of the review
We are going to concentrate on three key methodological questions: the effect of sample attrition and bias, the measurement of ‘adjustment’ and ‘identity’, and the relative contributions of the outcome predictors.

Sample attrition
This was the third wave of follow-ups, at which time the mean age of the sample was 24.7 years. The number of respondents was relatively large compared with most longitudinal adoption research (n = 224). The authors explained that each successive wave of follow-ups led to the latest sample being less than a third of the original. There were no data on all those who could not be reached, on those who did not comply and on the small category called ‘Hispanic and other’ who were excluded.

It is inevitable that prospective studies of this kind will have a loss at follow-up, but there is no ruling on how much loss can reasonably be tolerated. The reader would probably be very happy to accept results based on an 80 per cent response rate, but much less happy with 50 per cent or less. In this study, the final sample represents 20 per cent of those eligible and only 30 per cent of the original respondents or, expressed the other way round, seven out of ten outcomes are unknown. This has to be considered a serious shortcoming.

Sample bias
If this many cases have been lost, it is crucial to find out whether there is bias in the successfully followed-up cases compared with the original sample. In general, those who stay in contact with research are likely to be doing better than those who do not. Ill health, imprisonment or drug addiction in adopted people and, importantly, placement disruption, may discourage their adoptive parents from reporting on their experiences and are obvious barriers to participating in research. Less need for concern arises if all the features of the original sample (ie by race, sex, placement type, pre-placement history, new family structure) are proportionately represented in the third-wave follow-up. When this question was tested statistically, very little bias was found including for ‘ethnoracial’ background, and the researchers claimed that ‘the effects of sample attrition were negligible’. In other words, no more information was missing on adopted people from one particular ethnic origin than for any other.

However, their statement that ‘the sample had no bias due to attrition’ is not convincing. Variables used to describe the subject’s emotional or behavioural adjustment in previous waves were not significant in predicting membership of
the current wave, but these measures may not have been sufficiently sensitive. Both physical growth and general health problems did differ between those ‘lost’ and those who remained in the study. The link between growth and psychosocial factors is well known (Puckering et al., 1995) and it is likely that those who did not participate were not doing as well. The fact that there is no difference in attrition according to ethnicity, however, suggests that there might not be major differences between ethnic groups of non-participants according to race, but there is no way of being sure.

As the authors do not mention placement disruption, we have to assume that the respondents were all reporting on placements which had continued. This leaves open the possibility that the non-participant group contained many disruptions and these may have been more likely to be transracial but, again, it is impossible to know.

There is also no mention of placement selection bias. The North American Council on Adoptable Children and the Welcome House International, the two named agencies involved, were ‘specialist’ organisations and the African-American and Asian children may have been more likely to come from specialist agencies than the white children. If so, African-American and Asian children could have had better services from these agencies which could lead to better outcomes.

Measurement of ‘adjustment’

The way adjustment is measured is crucial because it is the means by which the proportion of good versus poor outcomes is calculated. The researchers’ measure of adjustment was based on parental accounts of behavioural and educational problems in their adopted children-now-adults. The parents completed the Children’s GAS and employed a cut-off of 80 out of 100 to separate those with good adjustment from the rest. On this basis, the mean score for each group according to sex and ethnicity was close to 80 – that is, all groups were reported by their parents to have good functioning or only transient symptoms. Within this fairly narrow range of scores, the African-American males had most problems and the African-American females fewest problems.

They also devised a problem adjustment score based on the summation of 12 variables. By this means, they claimed that most of the subjects were classified as having good adjustment with very few significant differences according to race and gender. As a group, the boys fared less well than the girls and the white boys did worst of all, with 62 per cent falling into the group having problems or poor overall adjustment. The difficulty with this part of the analysis is that the choice of cut-offs is often stated without giving the rationale for it and there were no comparisons with general population data. The superior school performance of Asian compared with other males may reflect the findings in the general population, but as there was no non-placed comparison group it is impossible to say.

Measurement of ‘ethnoracial identity’

The authors make a serious attempt at assessing a concept central to the transracial placement debate: ‘ethnoracial identity’. The assessment, undertaken solely with 183 parents who adopted an African-American or Asian child, was based on reports by the adoptive parents. All the subjects were found to have either a ‘secure’ or ‘strong’ racial identity and there were no statistical differences between groups.

This aggregate score may be a poor marker for a complex phenomenon like ethnoracial identification (their term). It must be remembered that this is the parents’ view. Many factors may influence both the parents’ perception and how the young adults present their feelings to adoptive parents. On the other hand, and in defence of their reliance on parental accounts, the transracial adopters are likely to be sensitised to their adopted children’s experience of racism and discrimination compared with white parents of white children. So, on balance, this is by no means a perfect measure, but it is a rare attempt to operationalise the problematic concept of identity much used in the debate. The researchers do acknowledge that caution should be
exercised here and more direct evidence is needed to be sure about these effects on identity.

The data led the researchers to refute the allegation that these adoptees had weak racial identity, but again they do not validate this measure of racial identity against the general population. We do not know how African-American and Asian children in biological families would rate on these markers, and parents’ awareness of children’s ethnocultural identification might vary according to race. We might, for example, expect white parents’ awareness of the ethnocultural identification of their African-American or Asian children to be heightened compared with that of white parents of white children.

Modelling the prediction of outcome
The authors performed the statistical technique called logistic regression on all their key variables. This is an appropriate method for examining factors which may be associated with outcome while keeping others constant. Three factors were found to raise the risk of poor outcome: being male, white and being placed alone in a new family where there were already children. African-American and Asian children adopted into white families, therefore, appeared to have similar outcomes compared to white children adopted into white families.

The last of the significant factors, although not discussed in the paper, could arise from ethnic difference between the placed children and the birth siblings, or age differences or sibling relationship problems. Placement of a single child in an established family has been shown in several studies to be significantly related to poor outcome for abused children in permanent placement (eg Quinton et al, 1998).

Value judgements and assumptions are inherent in both research and practice. For example, we tend to assume, as in this paper, that ‘transracial’ means African-American children in white families rather than white children in African-American families. This is an area fraught with ideological stances and entrenched beliefs which makes research particularly difficult. Partly because of our strongly held assumptions, it would be impossible to do ‘experimental’ research, for example randomly allocating either a white or African-American family to a African-American child. In longitudinal research, many families may not wish to be reminded of difficult times in the past, so loss to follow-up is an inevitable problem. If there is bias inherent in studies of large groups of children followed over time, there is even greater bias inherent in ‘snapshot’ accounts given by individuals, who may have particular reasons for coming forward to tell their story.

Conclusion
Practitioners need to be aware of new research claims but they also need to assess them critically. Our concern here has been to review new evidence gathered on the long-term outcome of transracial placements and to assess the quality of the research. We believe the study is noteworthy because it is based on a much larger sample and has a longer follow-up period than the handful of British follow-up studies published so far. There are, of course, limits as to how far the placement, two decades ago, of largely African-American and Asian-American adopted people can be generalised to the current UK scene. The social context (eg the extent of racism within society and towards which groups it is mainly directed) may vary greatly between the USA and the UK.

Our conclusion is that this study, in accord with others, points in the direction of generally favourable outcomes for transracial placements, but that the methodological hurdles are great enough to preclude definite conclusions. This study appears to be the first in the field to tackle the thorny issue of loss to follow-up but, unfortunately, even the most sophisticated statistical strategies for dealing with missing data cannot overcome the problem, and there is no way of being certain that the 30 per cent of the original sample who responded is representative. In future surveys, it will be important to budget for measures which encourage participants to continue to feel part of a longitudinal study between follow-ups. For example,
response rates can be boosted greatly by token financial rewards and by sending birthday cards and annual newsletters.

It would be a waste of precious information not to pay attention to findings about transracially adopted children who have been followed up into adulthood. Even if findings cannot be regarded as definitive, much can be learned which can then inform the planning and analysis of future studies. More creative ways of gaining insights are also needed. We would advocate a greater use of qualitative research alongside quantitative studies of this type. For example, semi-structured qualitative interviews with a carefully selected sample of these young adults would have shed more light on some of the issues most pertinent to today’s practice. The study was not able, for example, to report on the adult social environments of the adopted people in terms of community integration, social networks, friendships and partnerships. From a practical perspective, of course, to locate and interview a large number of geographically dispersed subjects would have been a much more time-consuming research plan.

With regard to current policy, the government circular on adoption placement (Department of Health, 1998) recommends a loosening of requirements for race matching. When there have been delays in achieving a precise match and the children urgently need the stability of a permanent home, this should be seen as a reasonable policy to follow, given the balance of research evidence. However, guidelines need to be observed for optimising these placements, for example by placing children in multi-ethnic communities, providing training and support for the families and the children so placed.

Adequate information is required on the numbers of children waiting for family placement and their ethnic background and cultural heritage. The needs of all these children must be brought to the attention of local communities and an assessment procedure developed that is welcoming, acceptable to all and free from bias. We then hope to see both an increase in placement choice and placement matching that is dealt with in a thoughtful and flexible manner so that the full range of developmental needs of each child can be best met.

References


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