Theorising the racial identity development of transracial adoptees: A symbolic interactionist perspective

Tina Patel presents findings from an empirical study carried out in Britain in 2000–2003 into the racial identity development of a small sample of adults who were transracially adopted as children. A symbolic interactionist perspective is applied to the analysis of the ways in which, to varying degrees, the adoptees experienced a number of difficulties tied to racial differences from the adoptive family, the racialised questions and categorisations of others, and inclusion and exclusion issues with birth and adoptive heritages. The study also highlights the way in which adoptees had understood and negotiated these difficulties in order to develop a particular type of ethnic identity that incorporates both parts of their birth and adoptive heritages, best represents how the adoptees see themselves and facilitates the pursuit of a positive sense of self. Using these findings, a number of best practice recommendations are made.

Introduction

‘Race’ is a powerful signifier of identity and an individual’s family is viewed as an important means by which this racial identity is nourished, developed and transmitted (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992; Ali, 2003). Empirical evidence in support of transracial adoption has found that despite some difficulties, transracial adoptees can grow up with a healthy racial identity provided they are raised by racially sensitive families in multicultural settings (Zastrow, 1977; Gill and Jackson, 1983; Bagley, 1993; Simon and Alstein, 2000). However, such evidence should not be used to mask other shortcomings of child and family services, such as the tendency for black minority ethnic children to wait longer in care while a ‘same-race’ placement is sought (Children First in Adoption and Fostering, 1990; Selwyn et al, 2004). This situation gives rise to arguments about institutional racism (Sunmonu, 2000), where prospective black minority ethnic adopters are being measured against a ‘white norm’ that deems black families as unsuitable and suggests that black minority ethnic and mixed-heritage children may even be ‘better off’ in a white home (Park and Green, 2000, p 15).

The arguments against this latter type of transracial adoption maintain that the black minority ethnic child suffers from poor identity development, low self-esteem and a hatred of their own black self, along with an inability to deal with racism, feelings of being different, self-rejection and an existence in a cultural limbo (ABSWAP, 1983; Maximé, 1986; Ahmad, 1990; Dutt and Sanyal, 1991; Small, 1991; Vroegh, 1992; Dagoo et al, 1993; Abdullah, 1996; Andujo, 1998; Thoburn et al, 2000; Barn, 2001; Massiah, 2005). Such arguments are based on an essentialist view of racial identity, namely that there is one clear and authentic set of ‘black characteristics’ that are unique to all black minority ethnic people and which do not change. Such a view ‘emphasises the benefits of knowing who you are . . . and of participation in collectivities organised around an essentialist identity’ (Ballis-Lal, 1999, p 57).

Whatever one’s views on transracial adoption, it is important to recognise that the very foundations of such arguments are problematic as they are largely based on ideologically dated assumptions or methodologically problematic research that often lacks any meaningful focus on the views, feelings and life experiences of the adoptees themselves. For example,

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1 The word ‘race’ is placed in inverted commas ‘to stress that the categorisation of people into different “races” is a social definition – one that has been used to determine hierarchies that have disadvantaged black people. It is not a biological definition as there is only one race, the human race’ (Barn, 1999, Glossary).
adoptive parents have largely been the subject of psychological testing, talked about by parents or teachers, and have tended to only be heard when they have had particularly negative experiences.

**Using sociological insight to advance understanding**

A more useful approach to theorising the racial identity development of transracial adoptees is provided by revisiting the debate from a firm sociological perspective. One way of doing this is to use a social constructionist approach. This argues that:

*boundaries of racial groups vary both over time and across social contexts . . . people need not have a single racial identity that they carry with them from birth to death [but] rather people may be born one race, live as a second race, and have yet a third racial identity at death.*

(Harris and Sim, 2000, pp 4–5)

Under this perspective, the boundaries of racial groups are subjective and fluid, and racial identity development is socially constructed in transactions that occur at and across permeable boundaries of group classification. Racial identities are actively and creatively produced by human beings in their everyday social interaction and can be best understood as an ‘ongoing synthesis of (internal) self-definitions and the (external) self-definitions of oneself offered by others’ (Jenkins, 1996, p 20). This social constructionist approach therefore moves away from the restrictive essentialist ideas of racial identity being something that is wholly naturally given.

Symbolic interactionism and the works of Herbert Blumer (1969), Erving Goffman (1982) and George H Mead (1995), which lie within the social constructionist approach, are especially useful for understanding the racial identity development of transracial adoptees. Here, the racial self is something that is developed in continual social communication and symbolic interaction. This emphasises the importance of the negotiation of racial categorisations found in the language, meanings and symbols of human symbolic communication and how such racial categorisations are constantly being negotiated and (re)negotiated in a continual process of social interaction. Thus, the individual negotiates a racial identity that reflects their immediate social environment. This identity will be one that the individual feels most appropriately fits in with and reflects the shared norms and values of that environment, as well as being the one with which they feel most comfortable.

The flexible nature of the racial identification process also means that the individual is able to construct for themselves multiple racial identities, to modify and adapt to a variety of sub-settings within society. For example, at certain times they will be required to lean more towards a particular racial identity and at other times towards another. The requirement to do so will be largely based upon the other social actors and the meanings attached to a particular racial identity within that sub-setting. The application of the symbolic interactionist theorisation of identity to understanding the racial identity development of transracial adoptees allows an appreciation of not only the socially constructed status and negotiated creation of racial identity, but also of its complex, diverse and fluid nature.

**The empirical study**

The study reported here placed a great deal of emphasis upon the value of in-depth and detailed data, narrated by the adoptees themselves, to understanding life experiences. This narrative approach has started to receive recognition in more recent transracial adoption studies (eg Simon and Roorda, 2000; Armstrong and Slaytor, 2001; Patton, 2001; Howe and Feast, 2003; Harris, 2006). In terms of sociological research, the life history approach and its research method of oral life history interviews has led to a deeper level of understanding about the experiences discussed in narratives (Hatch and Wiseniewski, 1995; Plummer, 2001; Howe and Feast, 2003; Harris, 2006). In terms of sociological research, the life history approach and its research method of oral life history interviews has led to a deeper level of understanding about the experiences discussed in narratives (Hatch and Wiseniewski, 1995; Plummer, 2001; Howe and Feast, 2003; Harris, 2006).
tunity to examine sociologically the meanings attached by the adoptees in their understanding, interpretation, negotiation and response to their life experiences is being provided, as opposed to simple descriptions of experiences and their effects. Furthermore, because sociological analysis was developed alongside the narratives of those scrutinised, respondents were empowered as they were provided with an avenue for their thoughts, feelings and experiences to be heard in their own voices.

It was acknowledged from the outset that there would be difficulty in gaining access to a sample with varied experiences willing to talk voluntarily at some length and in some depth. Attempts made to meet adoptees included making contact with specialist adoption organisations and

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**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent variables</th>
<th>Alison</th>
<th>William</th>
<th>Julie</th>
<th>Robert</th>
<th>Natasha</th>
<th>Hee Yun</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>Age*</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age* at Adoption</td>
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<td>3 mths</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6 mths</td>
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</table>

* Age in years, unless otherwise stated

**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent variations in background</th>
<th>Alison</th>
<th>William</th>
<th>Julie</th>
<th>Robert</th>
<th>Natasha</th>
<th>Hee Yun</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Of 'black' heritage by birth</td>
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<td>*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Of other ‘minority ethnic origin’ heritage by birth, ie Korean*</td>
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<td>Likely to be of ‘mixed heritage’ by birth*</td>
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<td>Siblings in adoptive family</td>
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<tr>
<td>Only non-biological child in adoptive family</td>
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* Although this could not be confirmed
placing advertisements in journals and magazines. This approach led to the recruitment of a sample of six adults who had been transracially adopted as children between the ages of three months and three years, and who sought to understand how their social experiences had affected their racial identity development in subsequent years. In adherence to strict ethical guidelines, respondents were guaranteed anonymity by the use of pseudonyms, in return for what emerged to be very frank, open and honest narratives.

All six adoptees had either been born in Britain or had lived there for a substantial period. Four of the adoptees had been born, transracially adopted and raised in Britain. The fifth had been born in Korea, transracially adopted by a German family and had grown up in Germany and Britain. The sixth had been born in the Seychelles, transracially adopted by a British family and raised in Britain. This means that two of the six were also intercountry adoptees. Details of the age and background characteristics of the participants are listed in Tables 1 and 2. However, despite these different histories, all the adoptees were black minority ethnic or 'mixed race' by birth and had been adopted into a white placement by non-family members. This represents the vast majority of transracial adoptions. So, despite the variations, the transracial aspect of the adoptions was viewed as sufficiently robust for an analysis to be made. In total, the six respondents generated about 40 hours of in-depth information, covering 193 years' worth of experiences.

Before discussing the results, it is important to note the limitations of this study. Firstly, the small sample poses questions about the generalisability of findings. Secondly, the reliance on volunteers and the request for them to divulge personal information and recall experiences could introduce bias into the results.

Study findings
The study found that to varying degrees, the adoptees experienced a number of difficulties and these were tied to several areas associated with the transracial aspects of their adoption.

Racial differences from the adoptive family
The adoptees had all been aware of the racial differences between themselves and their adoptive family from a very early age. This made the ‘adoptive’ nature of their position within the family obvious and often ever present. For some, this left a feeling of displacement:

Because I was adopted, you know, it’s a different situation . . . I should not be with them in the first place because I’m a different colour . . . it just makes me feel awkward . . . I think people look at me different too . . . they probably just find it weird or strange that someone can be in that situation. (William)

However, such feelings of displacement were not felt as intensely by everyone:

I suppose largely because I’ve been very happy where I am . . . well I don’t really know about the racial mix either, and again it’s been something I’ve been depressingly uncurious about . . . I’ve never had the curiosity to find out. I’ve always felt that, you know, you’re so clearly a product of the people who bring you up; I’m so much like my [adoptive] mum. (Julie)

It was clear, though, that all adoptees were aware of some sense of difference:

People said to me, ‘When did your parents tell you that you were adopted?’ and I’d say, ‘Well, quite soon because it was apparent,’ you know, so they kind of did it from the word go. (Alison)

The adoptive parents had mostly shown awareness of the adoptee’s feelings of difference and consequently attempted to reduce these in a variety of ways. One way was to emphasise how much they were ‘loved’ within the family and to have open discussions about the adoption:

They always talked about it openly . . . I think they answered any questions I had . . . I remember things like, ‘we were so thrilled when you were finally ours,’ and other stuff about feeling loved and wanted. (Julie)
Another approach was to treat the adopted child the same as other children in the family:

We used to go off on holidays and things together. . . . I was never excluded from the rest of the family in terms of that. You know, when we'd go off together I certainly wasn't treated any differently from the rest of the family or anything like that. (Robert)

Some parents underplayed differences by ignoring or ‘not talking’ about them:

They haven't talked much about it. . . . It just wasn't really mentioned. I think because [adoptive] mum thought it would make me feel bad. (Natasha)

Some of these strategies were successful as they made the adoptee feel ‘special’ and the focus of positive attention:

They met me at a christening and my dad danced with me all day because he thought I was so wonderful. There's this kind of image, you know, in falling for this little two-year-old and wanting to dance with me. . . . my parents always used to say 'we chose you', and that makes you feel very special. . . . I just felt like I mattered in the house. (Julie)

I always felt as if I was different, but . . . that turned me into a bit of a novelty, so I played on that. . . . I just felt almost like the most important person. . . . when I arrived they [social services] gave me an allowance, so I was walking around in all these new clothes and they [adoptive brothers] were walking in the hand-me-downs. (Alison)

At other times, however, such tactics were problematic. For example, despite some benefits of having the adoptive status underplayed and being treated the same as the biological children in the family, one adoptee felt that the denial of his adoptive status led to difficulties:

I think they sort of just thought that it's probably better to just get on with treating me like the rest of their children, so you know, there are some benefits in that and some problems in that attitude. . . . I think gradually over the years, I think I would have maybe liked to have known a little bit more about my [birth] parents. (Robert)

Such difficulties were echoed by other adoptees, although at different emotional levels:

To be honest, sometimes I wonder if I am actually settled in myself, and I don't think I am. I mean my life is normal, but sometimes I just feel really angry in myself because there are various things that have happened in the past, but if I can find out answers to this I will be happy, a lot happier than I have been. It's the not knowing that's the problem. Inside, I just feel a little muddled. I do feel a little hurt sometimes. . . . I think it's just a problem in myself, within me. . . . I think once I've found out I will be settled, a lot settled. (Natasha)

It's very difficult for a child to cope with this and to cope with their emotions if they did not get encouragement from their [adoptive] parents. . . . that is not respecting the culture. I am saying if you have another child from another background, try as much as possible to learn about it and get into it as much as possible. (Hee Yun)

For these last three respondents, the inadequacy of parental tactics for dealing with obvious racial and cultural differences had profound effects on how settled the children felt within their adoptive home. In particular, it deepened their already negative perceptions of difference, which then had serious consequences for how they perceived their social sense of self, racial identity and feelings of belonging:

Something about not being well in your own skin and trying to be someone else. It's difficult to say, but you try to find your identity. You have to find yourself and more than anything else you want to know where you belong and what makes you. (Hee Yun)
Just that sort of feeling of not feeling as a whole integrated person. I suppose I was in a bit of a limbo. So though I had a crude sense of identity as just being black, there was kind of no substance or no... there was nothing to support that really in terms of family ties or relationships, or parents, or that whole sort of social fabric. (Robert)

I want to feel more settled in myself... to feel less angry and more happier... to feel complete... knowing [about my birth mother and culture] would be a big patch to cover the big gap... to feel more normal. (Natasha)

Adoptees therefore took a more proactive role and dealt with such differences in their own way. This included seeking out contact with the birth family or community, making attempts to experience elements of the birth heritage by visiting the birth country or region, or viewing their position within the adoptive family as temporary:

I met up with my dad and his family, so that gave me more of a sense of feeling more of a whole and a complete person... it was definitely about getting closer to my birth identity. (Robert)

In my teens, when I got older my most precious wish was to once stand in Korea in the crowd and not to be recognised, that I am somebody else... When my adoptive grandfather died and left me money I went [to Korea]... It was good. I think it brought me quite a step forward... I think it helped me quite a lot in developing and understanding myself better. (Hee Yun)

I'm due to leave home soon anyway. Maybe I would keep in contact, yeah, but I don't know. I would say 'hello' if I saw them out but I don't think I'd go and see them or anything. She [adoptive mother] probably thinks I'm being funny or something. She just sees it as me causing trouble. We're different. That's what it's about at the end of the day. It's obvious I'm not from them people. It's a lie and it's just getting too much. I need to leave everyone. (William)

The racialised questions and categorisations of others

Feelings of racial difference were also felt by adoptees outside the adoptive home. For example, during adolescence and youth, the schooling and education experience was a key site where such feelings were experienced:

It was, you know, people saying things and then I would tell myself that I wasn't the same... and every time it was parents' evening, all the kids at school, no some of the kids at school, not bullied me, but every time they saw it... it made it difficult being adopted. How can I put it? I used to get not embarrassed but I could not really talk about it. I was feeling really sad about it and asking 'Why?' I think it did make them take the mickey out of me because I was different really. (William)

I very quickly became an outsider at that school because I was so different and they asked me questions. I mean people, kids want to know questions yourself you cannot answer... They ask me, 'Why are your parents not look like this?,' 'What is adopted?'... Sometimes I would answer them... but I got quite fed up because it was quite often... at least 50 to 60 kids want to know 'Why you look like this?'... 'Why is your eyes like this?' and 'Why don't you have right, real parents?'... I found out that kids started talking about me behind my back, so like 'she's that way' and 'she's so stupid'... it was because of your eyes, because of you being small, because of you being stupid you know... and that's what they mean... you are a stranger, different from me. (Hee Yun)

In later years, these problems were replicated in the workplace:

I work for social services now and my colour has become a rip-roar issue, but you know, unbelievably so, and to the point of being quite oppressive... It was never an issue; I mean I didn't think I wasn't black. I've never thought that I wasn't a different colour, but my friends will say to me, you know, 'Oh, I don't look
at you and see you as black, I see you as
you,’ or whatever . . . The issue at work
that I’ve now got is that society tells me
that I’m black and I don’t want that label.
(Alison)

Often these feelings of racial difference
were intensified for the mixed heritage
adoptees when they felt marginalised by
community members from both parts of
their black and white birth heritage:

But it was white kids calling me names
and black kids calling me names, because
I wasn’t black and I wasn’t white, I was
mixed, which made it even worse for them
obviously. . . . A black girl said, ‘Oh you
should not have mixes in this world, you
should not have half-castes’ and nasty
things like that. (Natasha)

Occasionally there’d be racist taunts from
other kids in the area. I’d be called, you
know, ‘nigger’ and ‘black bastard’ . . . I
must have been about 11 or 12 or some-
thing, and I was out with some white
friends, and this, well this black woman
said something to me about, you know,
just completely out of the blue, that
‘you’re neither black or white’ sort of
thing . . . so that kind of upset me more
than the odd kind of racist remarks about
being black. (Robert)

Adoptees in this situation often felt
themselves being racially categorised by
others. These categorisations were incor-
crect, stereotypical and often offensive,
and generally made adoptees feel
uncomfortable:

One of the unsuccessful applicants took
out a grievance on the basis of race
because he felt that he’d been discrimina-
ted against – a Mauritian guy – and when
I, I think not completely naïve, pointed
out that actually the person who got the
post was also not white, I got this tirade
of stuff about being the wrong kind of
black, which is the first time I think I
actually came up against that . . . you
know, it had not occurred to me that this
kind of hostility would be coming at me
from a black person . . . that’s what I pick
up; it’s an exclusion thing. But if you were
to ask me, I suppose there’s a definite
sense that yes, I don’t have a black con-
sciousness and also that . . . I suspect that
for some black people I am not black
enough. I’ve kind of sold out in some way
or form. (Julie)

You know it was like, ‘Yeah but she’s
black’ and a lot of people were like ‘Yeah,
boo-yak-a-shah’ to me [Natasha clicks
her fingers together and swings her arm
outwards], and I’d just say back, ‘Yeah,
hi, my name’s Natasha, what’s yours?’
and they’d be expecting me to be called
some sort of, I don’t know, Chanelle or
something like that, and I’d say, ‘My name
is Natasha.’ So I think they had a lot of
pre-conceived ideas. (Natasha)

For some of the adoptees, it led to a
specific type of racism based on others
presenting a crudely negotiated form of
‘acceptance’. For example, Robert, who
had earlier mentioned being particularly
upset by a remark made by a black
woman about his ‘mixed heritage’ back-
ground, had, by the time he was an adult,
some very positive experiences with the
black community and felt that most of
this type of ‘acceptance’ racism had been
made by white people about the black
parts of his birth heritage:

I don’t feel entirely accepted in society or
a kind of attitude where, you know, where
white people say that ‘I don’t like black
people but you’re OK.’ I mean I don’t want
to be sucked into that sort of accept-
ance . . . I just feel more comfortable with
black people. I feel that I have a certain
amount of respect from white people who
know me, but maybe kind of more so from
the black community. (Robert)

Inclusion and exclusion issues with birth
and adoptive heritages
When they reflected on their experiences
with their birth and adoptive heritages,
the adoptees all indicated various degrees
of experience and involvement with each,
and the variety of ways in which they felt
included in and excluded from both, at
different times and to various degrees. For
example, a lack of knowledge and experi-
ence of their birth heritage, coupled with
a lack of contact with members of the ethnic community of their birth, had led to adoptees feeling out of place with the new contact they suddenly had in adulthood:

I once went with somebody to a gospel night and to be honest it was like completely, you know, ‘Wow’, over my head sort of thing. I really just sat there . . . it was like, you know, ‘La, la, la’ and I thought, ‘OK, well, it’s not me.’ It probably would not have been in my [birth] culture, if you like, and you know it was probably the Jamaican thing, but still, it’s quite close to obviously what I might have been doing . . . but it was really weird, because I wasn’t used to that. It was really different. (Natasha)

In addition, some of the adoptees’ new contact with members of their birth family and community were rather negative as they were criticised for having identified more closely with the white parts of their adoptive heritage, ie they were viewed as being ‘too white’. Interestingly, such an attack was still in place even though the adoptees were of mixed heritage by birth:

They [birth sisters] took me to this hair-dressers in London, and they straightened my hair; they blow-dried it straight, and it took ages . . . and that was a bloody whole experience. They got these hot rods that they put onto your hair; you know, and you’ve got all these big black mamas in there with their straightened hair, and oh God, we were there for about four hours and they straightened my hair and I hated it, absolutely hated it. I thought, ‘Oh God, I’ve got to go out in this tonight’, because they weren’t going to let me wash it and leave it to go curly like I normally do. I had to go out and I felt really black, black, black that night. I didn’t like it at all . . . I just can’t cope. I haven’t had any black friends or any mixed heritage friends at all throughout the whole of my life and I just could not cope with these [birth] sisters of mine who were like taking over and portraying me in this way and putting me in their category . . . In the end, they called me stuff like ‘coconut’ and ‘bounty bar’, meaning black on the outside and white on the inside. (Alison)

This situation proved especially difficult for one adoptee who, in addition to having felt distanced from his adoptive family due to the racial differences and obviousness of the adoption, was criticised and rejected by his black birth family:

That’s why there’s that barrier up between me and them [adoptive family]. You know, it’s because they just can’t see what it’s like for me . . . because I should not have been adopted or living like this in the first place, so therefore it’s like living a lie. I mean I’m not from them obviously, so it’s like living with someone else’s parents. I should not have been there really with them. But searching [for my birth family] was a waste of time to be honest . . . I think they [birth family] thought I was too, you know, white . . . so it wasn’t worth it, we’re different . . . I’ve had a white upbringing. (William)

However, for another ‘mixed heritage’ adoptee, there was a sense of ‘natural’ inclusion with the black part of his birth heritage and a move away from the white part, as well as from his adoptive home:

I see it as maybe more specifically applying to African-Caribbean people, and yeah, I sort of see it as important to me, but more because I do feel that there is a lot of racism in society . . . it’s sort of a cultural and social thing, you know . . . It’s kind of a feeling that as time goes on, you feel as if you have more of a natural affinity with that people . . . I just feel more comfortable with black people on the whole. (Robert)

But, whether positive or negative, the first important point is the way in which the adoptees had understood and negotiated these experiences in order to emerge with a particular type of mixed heritage racial identity. This incorporated both parts of their birth and adoptive heritages, giving adoptees a racial identity that best represented the mixed and flexible ways in which they saw themselves:
I could not choose because in every different situation I am a different person. I refuse to choose. You cannot choose, there is no option, because no person is mainly one person, you know with that character. You always change in every situation . . . It is really something where I refuse to say that I am mainly that person. I think it’s unfair to say that and choose. (Hee Yun)

I think a lot of people see me as my sisters described me, as being black on the outside and white on the inside. I am black and white on the inside, but I’m black and white on the outside as well, but I don’t know. It’s difficult. I know I’m more white I suppose, and that’s what black people see too, that in my attitude and actions I’m more white. They think that because of it, I’m just white but I’m both, although yes, more white ‘cos of my upbringing, but not all white. (Alison)

Secondly, in many cases it was a process of racial identity negotiation that adoptees saw as being an important contributory factor in their achievement of a positive sense of self:

I suppose the racist name-calling was one thing that gave me a sort of sense of identity about who I was really. There wasn’t really anything else that was asserting that I was black, so in a funny sort of way it was actually quite positive . . . Now I acknowledge I have a mixed cultural heritage, but I see myself as black, black African, black African – Igbo-Irish to be precise . . . I’m not very politically active now, but for a long time I was. So yeah, I would kind of take it as a political term of, you know, all people of colour or non-white people. (Robert)

As far as your average black person goes, I’m not particularly black at all; you know, my skin colour and my hair and that’s about as far as it goes . . . I’m not a stereotypical black person but it doesn’t bother me personally . . . I have a lot of strengths. I’m grounded and have a strong sense of self and am successful in what I do. (Julie)

However, it also emerged that some adoptees were reluctant to assign themselves racial labels:

I don’t have black or white skin, but brown [skin] . . . I have no racial identity. I’m not black and I don’t see myself as white either. But I think I’m just me, an individual, the original me . . . I’m human, yeah a human person at the end of the day. (Natasha)

I would just describe myself as black because of the fact that my birth parents were black and nothing else. That’s just the way it is really . . . I’m black but I know I have white elements in me. I can’t explain it really, it’s just things in me. I suppose that makes me mixed, I don’t know . . . I never thought about having a racial identity though. I just never really thought about it. It means nothing to me . . . I’m just human really. (William)

Yet despite their adaptability, the respondents’ narratives still indicate their inability to escape from their racialised experiences emerging from the transracial aspects of their adoption, and the role of these on their sense of self.

Discussion
Contemporary British society is multiracial. A long history of globalisation, imperialism and immigration has resulted not only in a diversity of racial groups, but also in the creation of hybrid racial groups whose racial identification cannot be slotted simplistically into singular racial categories or classifications based on references to single characteristics, such as biological, genealogical or essentialist cultural features. This by no means disputes the racialised features of society, neither does it blindly present a naïve view of the extent of racial discrimination in British society. The key point rather is to highlight the very existence of these hybrid racialised identities and their socially constructed nature. In terms of transracial adoption, the study draws attention to the ways in which transracial adoptees negotiate for themselves a specific type of racial identity, and how they do this via involvement in meaning-
ful symbolic interaction and continuing negotiation processes.

Do transracial adoptees experience difficulties when growing up because of racial differences? The data from this study clearly suggest that they do, mainly because it acts as a primary form of visible difference. However, although some of the adoptees felt that they would not have had such difficult and painful experiences if they had been placed with an adoptive family of the same ethnicity, all spoke in detail about the positive aspects of their adoption and its preference over a long stay in care. Indeed, given that they could not comment on the unknown, ie where they would be if the adoption had not occurred, the respondents expressed appreciation for having been placed when and where they were.

Do transracial adoptees consequently develop a negative or problematic racial identity? In some ways the data suggest that they do not. But it is more complex than this. What is suggested is the creation of a specific type of racial identity that is particular to the circumstances and experiences of black minority ethnic and ‘mixed heritage’ children adopted into white homes. It emerged that although the adoptees talked about their racialised identities in different and sometimes vague ways, they were not perceived by themselves or this researcher’s analysis of their narratives as being confused or as having developed a problematic or damaged racial identity. Rather, the adoptees felt comfortable, and many very secure, in defining their sense of self in a way that demonstrated fluid, flexible and multiple forms of a racial identity which, to various degrees, incorporated both birth and adoptive heritages.

Clearly, at times adoptees suffered particular difficulties in their negotiation of a racial identity. However, in different ways and to different extents, they all developed a positive sense of self, incorporating a view of their racial identity that they felt to be accurate and comfortable. This is due to two reasons. Firstly, they overcame difficulties by using other achievements as measures of success, for example, successful professional careers, doing well in higher education, being in loving relationships or having children of their own. Secondly, adoptees asserted their own sense of pride as transracial adoptees with elements of both birth and adoptive racial heritages. Indeed, what emerges are their powerful ability and right to present a conceptualisation of a mixed heritage racial identity negotiated from their own experiences.

It was also found that there are different types of transracial identities, because adoptees were racialised in different ways. Their settlement on a particular type of transracial identity was determined by their own negotiation of: (i) racial differences from the adoptive family; (ii) the racialised questions and categorisations of others; and (iii) inclusion and exclusion issues with birth and adoptive heritages. So whether adoptees had a strong black identity or not, they had all tackled the same issues associated with having been born of black minority ethnic or ‘mixed heritage’ origin, and then being adopted into a white home.

The adoptees’ transracial identity had therefore been negotiated in ongoing social interactions where existing racially based definitions and assumptions had been accepted, or rejected and challenged, in a way that allowed them to settle on a transracial identity that incorporated both parts of their birth and adoptive heritages and with which they felt comfortable.

From these findings it is possible to make several suggestions in terms of ‘race’ and adoption best practice. Firstly, to explore seriously the value of the informal fostering methods that have for so long been successful in African communities, as a way of placing black children on a long-term basis with families of a similar background (Sandven and Resnick, 1990; Sunmonu, 2000). Secondly, further recruitment campaigns should be set up in order to recruit black minority ethnic and ‘mixed heritage’ adopters. However, it must also be recognised that the practice of transracial adoption is a viable option in its own right, and therefore should be seriously considered as a means of providing children with immediate dedicated care, love, support, permanence and security. Thirdly, a specifically tailored system of
support needs to be established that offers transracial adopters and adoptees help and advice in dealing with the types of difficulties experienced by those in this study.

Conclusion
The development of a racial identity is a complex process. In the case of transracial adoption, especially the adoption of black minority ethnic and ‘mixed heritage’ children by white families, a number of significant issues that are distinct to the transracial aspects of the adoption emerge. It is argued here that in order to understand the development of such a transracial identity, it is important to move away from restrictive essentialist ideas about ‘race’ and, instead, use the social constructionist approach, especially the symbolic interactionist perspective, as a way of looking at how adoptees negotiate and construct their sense of self.

In this study, it was found that the adoptees had experienced a number of difficulties tied to the transracial aspects of the adoption, for example: racial differences in the adoptive family; the racialised questions and categorisations of others; and inclusion and exclusion issues with birth and adoptive heritages. However, particularly important is the way in which adoptees had refused to tie themselves to, or seek pursuit of, a singular racial identity. Instead, they had negotiated these difficulties and developed a particular type of mixed heritage racial identity that incorporated both parts of their birth and adoptive heritages and best represented how the adoptees saw themselves and their pursuit of a positive sense of self.

The sociological insight offered by use of the social constructionist approach and the symbolic interactionist perspective to a much debated social work issue that is bogged down by restrictive ideology and problematic research increases our understanding of the racial identity development of a group of individuals who, like many others in multi-racial society, have hybrid or multi-layered racial identities.

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