

Article

The Complexities of Mixed Families: Transracial Adoption as a Humanitarian Project

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Abstract: Along with other types of racially mixed families, families built through transracial adoption in the United States have solidified as an increasingly recognized family form. Along with this increasing acknowledgement, transracial families must also contend with narratives that formulate transracial adoption as an act of humanitarianism on the one hand and as a replication of systemic racism and colonialism on the other. This article explores how members of transracial families respond to these contradictory narratives through interviews with 30 transracial adoptees and their white siblings. Their experiences highlight three responses that transracial family members have regarding the idea of their families being classified as a humanitarian project: recreating transracial adoption as humanitarianism within their own lives, reclaiming their identity and family as separate from humanitarianism, and resisting the humanitarian aspects of transracial adoption altogether. Specifically, this study adds nuance to the question of how mixed families navigate the enduring power of humanitarianism within their own lives.

Keywords: adoption; colonialism; humanitarianism; international adoption; transracial adoption



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1. Introduction

In 2006, musician and popular culture icon Madonna adopted a child from Malawi after engaging in volunteer work within the country. Soon after the adoption was formalized and publicized, it was revealed that the child, David, had a viable family network, including a father who was not in support of the adoption. Following this reveal, news outlets buzzed with controversy about the practice of adoption (Breuning and Ishiyama 2009). Many argued that Madonna's adoption of David was emblematic of a new kind of colonialism: one in which the family can be seen as a humanitarian project (New York Times 2009). In an era where some believe that the existence of transracial adoption in the United States is necessary in order to cease the needless suffering of children both at home and abroad, Madonna's adoption of David brought attention to the tensions and controversies within the practice of transracial adoption.

Transracial adoption refers to placing children with adoptive parents of a different race from their own and occurs through multiple forms of adoptive processes, including both domestic (including foster care, private adoptions, or inter-familial adoption) and international (adoption from across national boundaries). Though exact numbers can be hard to come by, researchers estimate that approximately one-quarter of all adoptions within the United States each year can be categorized as "transracial" (Marr 2017). Most often within the United States, racially minoritized children are adopted into white families (Perry 2010). Although the family is an always political form, transracial families may be unique in the ways in which their families are easily identified by themselves and others, as shaped by systemic racial issues. Indeed, research has highlighted the ways in which families with transracial adoptees are impacted by racism by outsiders (Godon-Decoteau and Ramsey 2018), immigration battles around citizenship rights (Laybourn 2018), and larger colonialist ideologies (Branco 2021).

Scholars have broadened the definition of humanitarianism from organized relief aimed at alleviating human suffering to include support stemming from grassroots efforts, calling it

“volunteer humanitarianism” (Sandri 2018) and “citizen aid” (Fechter and Schwittay 2019). In this vein, a growing number of scholarly projects acknowledge the role that humanitarianism plays within the practice of transracial adoption. This research has documented how members of transracial families understand adoption as a humanitarian act, including adoptees (Cawayu and De Graeve 2020), adoptive parents (Khanna and Killian 2015; Zhang and Lee 2011), and adoption workers (Raleigh 2017). Whereas some of this literature reports that transracial family members view transracial adoption as a charitable practice that affords children opportunities and access to material, emotional, and social resources that they would otherwise lack (Khanna and Killian 2015; Wyver 2021), others highlight the experiences of transracial family members that view transracial adoption as an inherently unequal act that takes children away from their communities, families, and cultures of origin (Cawayu and De Graeve 2020). However, these accounts do not often attempt to bring together these contradictory viewpoints.

Given this background, this article investigates how transracial family members in the United States make meaning of transracial adoption as a humanitarian project. This project, accordingly, starts with a wide-ranging question: How do American transracial family members articulate and respond to the link between transracial adoption and humanitarianism? In investigating the contradictory narratives that surround transracial adoption as a humanitarian action, this article reveals the ways in which transracial families elucidate their adoption story as tied to the structural conditions of adoption, and how that spurs their reactions.

2. Transracial Adoption, Humanitarianism, and Colonialism

A prevailing strand of the sociology of the family has investigated the experiences and outcomes of families that defy notions of racial purity, including couples formed across racial lines (Buggs 2017) and families with mixed race children (Brunnsma 2005; Chang 2015; Song and O’Neill Gutierrez 2015). Similarly, families formed through transracial adoption must contend with familial experiences that challenge ideologies that families must be linked by racial lineage, resemblance, and biological relationships (Goss 2018). Scholarly works on transracial adoption have proliferated in recent years, with research spanning a wide-range of adoption contexts, including within countries in Africa (Luyt and Swartz 2021), Asia (Heimsoth and Laser 2008; Johnson 2002), Europe (Ferrari and Rosnati 2013; Howell 2006; San Román and Rotabi 2019; Wyver 2019, 2021; Yngvesson 2000, 2012), and South America (Cawayu and De Graeve 2020; Fonseca 2002).

Historically, academic work on transracial adoption within the United States context has stemmed from a psychological or clinical perspective, lacking a sociological lens to investigate transracial families (Laybourn 2017). Among the sociological research that has explored transracial adoption, scholars have documented attitudes toward transracial adoption (Perry 2010, 2011), the racial socialization of transracial adoptees (Barn 2018; Butler-Sweet 2011; Sweeney 2017), and the ways in which transracial families understand and even appropriate racial identities (Goss et al. 2017; Laybourn and Goar 2021).

Transracial adoption in the United States stems from a history of humanitarianism and anti-racist liberalism (Wyver 2021). International adoption became more commonplace when Korean children orphaned after the Korean war were adopted by white parents in the United States as a humanitarian and religious act to save children (Choy 2013; Oh 2005). The discourses that place transracial adoption as a humanitarian act actually work to obfuscate, and perhaps even exacerbate, the ethical issues present in the adoption system (Cheney 2014). Adoptees themselves are impacted by these notions of humanitarianism interwoven within their family origin stories. Cawayu and De Graeve (2020, p. 2) found, in their interviews with Bolivian adoptees, that “their stories oscillate between reproducing the dominant psychopathological understanding of their displacement and socio-political understandings that centralise the colonial dynamics in transnational adoption”.

Domestic transracial adoption was impacted by the ideals of the Civil Rights Movement (Patton-Imani 2000). Scholars have found that humanitarianism is also a factor the in

domestic adoption of children of color (Barn 2013; Zhang and Lee 2011). White adoptive parents marshal a number of humanitarian notions when choosing domestic transracial adoption. For example, some white adoptive parents report choosing domestic transracial adoption in order to give racially minoritized children a chance at what they perceive as a superior lifestyle (Jennings 2006).

Transracial adoption can be conceptualized as an extension of the state of racial relations within the United States (Jerng 2010). Although some may assume that the adoption of racially minoritized children by white families would hamper the mechanisms that reproduce racial inequality through the acquisition of white generational wealth, educational opportunities, and access to resourced social networks, research indicates that transracial families also work in reproducing racism. The lack of understanding and discussions about race have been a common critique leveled at parents who adopt children transracially, as showcased by the National Association of Black Social Workers' vehement condemnation of transracial adoption, referring to it as a form of genocide (Silverman 1993). White adoptive parents may utilize racialized stereotypes in order to decide which children they are willing to adopt (Kubo 2010; Tessler et al. 2011). There exists a racial hierarchy within the adoption system in the United States which places white children at the top as the most desirable candidates for adoption, followed by Asian or Latino children, and placing Black children at the bottom (Kubo 2010; Raleigh 2017). This maps onto models of racialization in the United States that triangulate Asians and Latinos between whites and Blacks, lauding them as cultural exceptions while maintaining notions of their foreignness (Bonilla-Silva 2004; Kim 1999).

Along with racism, transracial adoption also links to colonialism, which involves the control of a society by an outside and reigning state. Scholars have refined the idea of colonialism to understand how it functions outside of state powers, through technology, non-government organizations, or cultural pursuits, calling this new form of colonialism "neocolonialism". Neocolonialism is, therefore, seen to be more subtle, varied, and invisible than more traditional forms of colonialism (Nkrumah 1965). The link between transracial adoption and colonialism occurs within multiple types of adoptions. In international transracial adoptions, the adoptive process is essentially split into two types of countries: those countries in which adoptees are placed with adoptive parents, known as receiving countries, and countries in which adoptees are born, termed as sending countries (Bartholet 1993). Countries within the Global North, such as the United States, most often act as receiving countries within the adoptive process, whereas countries in the Global South (including historically common international adoption locations such as China, Colombia, Ethiopia, India, Guatemala, and South Korea) serve as sending countries. This bifurcation clearly works in recreating the colonial divide, with biological families in the Global South positioned as in need of aid by white, privileged families in the Global North. The language of consumption and kinship often found in international adoption narratives even betrays its colonial foundations (Wyver 2019).

The narratives of international transracial adoption reflect larger colonial ideologies. The ideology of colonializing countries often stems from a civilizing mission, in which colonialism is thought to be the solution to undesirable political, social, and economic conditions in the Global South (Fischer-Tine and Mann 2004). Similarly, within the international adoption world, children in the Global South are understood as in need by prospective adoptive parents who may view adoption as providing them with a venue to both opportunity and civility (Dorow 2006). This messaging is echoed by adoption agencies and state actors themselves in the ways in which children are shaped into valuable resources and marketed as available for adoption to families in the Global North (Hogbacka 2019; Yngvesson 2000).

Children that appear to be abandoned may actually be part of a more complex picture (Fonseca et al. 2015). Birth parents may be forced to abandon their children due to larger structural issues in their lives, including poverty, war, and conflict. Adoption agencies often take advantage of these larger structural issues, urging birth parents to choose adoption

without the full understanding of what the process entails and instead of finding other options, such as securing funds for support to keep the child at home (Roby 2004). Thus, the intrinsic power imbalance within international transracial adoption intertwines with colonization, with the practice being tinged with “the taking by the rich and powerful of the children born to the poor and powerless” (Bartholet 1993, p. 90). Partly in response to the increasing attention these potential ethnic conundrums are receiving, the rate of international adoption in the United States has fallen steeply within recent years (Jones and Placek 2017).

Despite these contradictory elements that frame transracial adoption as a humanitarianism action on the one hand and as a vestige of racism and colonialism on the other hand, the vast majority of work on adoption ignores questions of how these motivations impact the lives of adoptees and their families. Most of the scholarship on transracial adoption focuses on the outcomes of children in psychological and academic measures, or their experiences with racial identity and ethnic pride (Fisher 2003). Moreover, most of this work reports the experiences of the adoptive parents of transracial adoptees, missing the perspectives and experiences of the adoptees themselves. Research on transracial adoption has also historically excluded siblings from the adoption narrative, lacking the ability to understand the ways in which transracial adoption impacts multiple members of the family. This article hopes to offer a corrective.

3. Methodology

This study consists of in-depth interviews with 30 members of transracial families, including both transracial adoptees (16) and white (non-adopted) siblings of transracial adoptees (14). Of the adoptees interviewed, 7 considered themselves Black, 4 considered themselves Latino/a, and 5 considered themselves Asian. The 14 siblings all considered themselves white and identified with having at least 1 sibling they considered a transracial adoptee. All participants were raised in the United States. The majority (24 or 87%) described their backgrounds as “middle class”, with only 3 (10%) identifying as either “lower or working class”, or 1 (0.033%) as “upper-class”. The sample ranged in age from 18 to 67 with a mean and median age of 30.48 and 32, respectively. Please see Table S1 for additional descriptive statistics regarding the participants.

The study population was created through a three-tiered process. First, names and contact information of potential participants were obtained through contacts in adoption communities and personal networks. Second, potential participants were contacted about engaging in a study about transracial adoption. Third, via a snowball sampling technique implemented at each interview, participants were asked to refer to other contacts, organizations, or groups for participant recruitment. Interviews took place between 2013 and 2014 and were tape-recorded.

A grounded theory approach was used to analyze the data. This took three distinct stages. First, the transcripts were inductively examined to identify various loose themes generated from the experiences of the participants, during which the theme of transracial adoption as humanitarianism emerged (Glaser 1978). Second, the transcripts were read and coded again as part of a focused coding stage (Charmaz 2008). Finally, member checks were utilized to develop a systematic and analytic theory for the narratives of the participants (Guba and Lincoln 1981).

Due to the wide variation in age within this sample, the findings may be able to be attributed to generational differences. Additionally, as only adults from transracial families participated in this study, the findings may not reflect contemporary transracial adoptive families. Moreover, the findings are only able to capture the ways in which participants were making meaning of their family as related to humanitarianism at the time of the interview, which may represent a change from previously-held beliefs. Actual names, places, or potentially identifying associations are not utilized within the article, and all names are pseudonyms.

4. Results

4.1. Adoption as a Humanitarian Project

Given their own lack of personal genealogy, American families with transracial adopted members make sense of their familial origin story by understanding how structural and wide-scale factors intervened to bring their family together. Thus, the discourse and narratives on and from these families demonstrated thoughtful reflection on the construction of mixed race family formations. In particular, participants emphasized the ways in which their adoption stories are tied to their conflicting opinions on the necessity of transracial adoption. Specifically, transracial family members describe the practice of adoption as an extension of humanitarianism, wherein adoptive families portray adoption as a social, cultural, and religious benefit to adoptees, and also as emblematic of white, American power relations.

Adoption, in general, is a family form that must be entered into intentionally. That is, unlike a pregnancy, which may be unintentional and unplanned, formal adoption requires adoptive parents to marshal significant financial and legal resources across months and even years in order to build their family through adoption. The intentionality of adoption requires explicit motivation to adopt on the part of adoptive parents. Though infertility is the major reason that most families choose to adopt, research has documented that altruism also serves as a powerful motivator for adoption (Goodman and Kim 1999; Berry et al. 1996). For these particular adoptive parents, adoption is seen as a method to provide children with a bevy of emotional, social, and economic resources that may not have been available to them had they stayed with their birth families. This is particularly true in the case of transracial adoption, wherein children from racially minoritized families are afforded access to white, privileged resources that have been systemically denied to them. Thus, within this framework of altruism, transracial adoption is conceptualized as an extension of humanitarianism.

The transracial family members interviewed for this project also classified transracial adoption as a humanitarian project. Often, this notion of transracial adoption as akin to humanitarianism emerged when the participant was describing the motivation for adding a child from across racial lines to the family. For example, Jaycee, a 19-year-old white sibling of two Chinese international adoptees, explained:

My family learned about the issues with abandoned baby girls [in China]. The conditions of the orphanages. We just couldn't get it out of our minds, especially my mom. She just felt like she had to help somehow. And eventually that turned into pursuing adoption.

Furthermore, Lucy, a white 19-year-old sibling to two Ethiopian international adoptees, described a similar instance that led her family to consider transracial adoption:

In seventh grade, they presented a whole thing about the genocide going on in Darfur, and I was just like 'What can we do? What can we do?' like type of thing. And I was like 'Mom, we should adopt a child from Darfur.' My mom was like, 'Doing this one thing is not going to do much,' and I was like 'Well, it's going to make a difference for that one child.'

Both Jaycee and Lucy describe their families as driven to transracial adoption by learning about social issues that were negatively impacting children in other parts of the world, including gender-based discrimination and civil war. They then used the practice of transracial adoption as a way to provide aid to these children. Therefore, they conceptualized their family's transracial adoption as a means to "make a difference" and to "help somehow".

Within these narratives, transracial adoption is situated as the penultimate humanitarian act. As opposed to other forms of philanthropy, such as donating money or goods to charities or engaging in acts of volunteerism, transracial adoption is framed as a more meaningful and personalized way for families to bring their humanitarian ideology into their private lives and homes. Families may indeed feel obliged to explore transracial

adoption in order to feel that they were truly living out their values of humanitarianism. Annaliese, a 19-year-old Chinese international adoptee explained this perspective:

My parents wanted to go beyond just sending money. They thought about it, about what they could really do, and they thought, we should bring a child into our lives that needs help. They thought that would be the most impactful way that they could really change a life.

Though this perspective of adoption as humanitarianism may initially seem to be more aligned with transracial families that are built through international adoption, transracial families completed through domestic adoption also expressed that they understood adoption as a type of humanitarianism. In these cases, racialized social conditions within the United States were expressed as the motivation for families to choose transracial adoption. Lydia, a 67-year-old white sibling to a biracial Black and white domestic adoptee described how her sister came to live with her family:

We took her in as a foster baby, originally. She came from a rough, well, a rough background. You know, they were a mixed couple. We were told that the extended family didn't support the relationship. That they wouldn't participate in her life. She would have had a hard go of it, if she didn't get out, you know? So, we were there.

Similarly, Natalie, a 26-year-old white sibling to a Black domestic adoptee, explained the following about her brother's origin story before being adopted:

We don't know that much about his past, except that we know he came from [the city]. And given that, and what it's like in those neighborhoods, I'm sure it was nice for him to be raised [here], go to our private school, our vacations, everything.

Lydia and Natalie use racialized code words about their sibling's pasts, describing them as 'rough' and urban, and refer to intrafamilial turmoil regarding interracial couplings, as proof of the potential damage that their Black siblings might have fared had they not been adopted into a white family. In this way, transracial adoption is viewed as a protecting force that allows for the transracial adoptees to reach their full potential and experience a better quality of life through their newfound association with whiteness. This view of transracial adoption, as providing adoptees with resources that they would have otherwise never had access to, also impacted how transracial adoptees themselves understood their origin stories. For example, Meghan, a 22-year-old Mexican adoptee, explained, "I am so thankful that I was adopted. I would have had nothing otherwise, I'm sure. I'll always be, like, so grateful to my parents for giving me so much".

As the experiences of these transracial family members show, transracial adoption is not viewed only as a method of family building. Transracial adoption is also understood by transracial family members themselves an act of humanitarian intervention and is, thus, offered as the solution to a host of social, economic, and political issues that impact children both at home and abroad. However, the ways in which these humanitarian values are espoused varies based on the racialization of the adoptee within the American context, with international transracial adoptees being cast as the victims of large-scale societal failures, such as war, country-wide poverty, or gender-based discrimination, whereas domestic transracial adoptees are seen as casualties of individual or community failures, such as neighborhood violence or relationship issues.

Despite the prominence of transracial adoption as akin to humanitarianism within the experiences of the transracial family members interviewed, not all transracial family members identified the act as the solution to social problems. Instead, other transracial family members saw the association of transracial adoption with humanitarianism as itself problematic, and a vestige of the larger social problems caused by transracial adoption. For these transracial family members, transracial adoption was seen as a system of, and perhaps as a contributor to, racism, colonialism, and American exceptionalism.

For example, the motivations that led adoptive parents to bring a child into their family through transracial adoption were interrogated by these transracial family members. Tomás, a 30-year-old Latino domestic adoptee, explicated:

I think that my parents' mentality for adopting was, you know, they were saving poor kids of color who would die without them. They had a very, you know, savior complex.

In this way, that same gratitude that other transracial family members such as Meghan had expressed regarding their personal history with transracial adoption led other transracial adoptees like Tomás to question the practice of transracial adoption altogether. This notion that transracial adoption was a selfless sacrifice that Tomás reports he felt his parents has internalized was also expressed to transracial adoptive family members by outsiders. Charlotte, a 29-year-old white sibling to three international adoptees from Korea, China, and Guatemala, expounded:

When people find out that [my siblings] are all adopted, people always say, "Oh your parents are such saints!" I think they just thought it was so good to be the kind of family that would do this. But I hated the implication. So, if they are saints, does it take a miracle to want to have my siblings as a child? Is that what that means? I know it hurt my siblings' feelings, too.

Tomás and Charlotte both cast doubt on the motivations and reactions that place transracial adoption as a humanitarian project by highlighting the ways in which adoptive parents are cast as white saviors. White saviorism is an ideology in which whites understand their actions as designed to inspire and ease the suffering of people of color, often despite great cost to the white savior themselves (Hughey 2014). These transracial family members felt that this ideology altered how adoption was discussed within the family, with an emphasis on the gratitude that adoptive children should feel for being chosen by white American parents. This was particularly true for families with Asian and Latino adoptees, perhaps reflecting notions in which adoptees are viewed by transracial families as able to be saved in the first place.

Beyond showcasing the link to white saviorism, transracial family members were also critical of the adoption system as a whole. Zoey, a 27-year-old Colombian international adoptee, explained:

I really feel like the structure of international adoption, you have no way of knowing if the adoption was ethical. Mine wasn't. And I really like I just feel that it's an extension of colonialism.

For transracial adoptees like Zoey, questions about the circumstances surrounding her own adoption led her to perceive international adoption as an extension of colonialism. Zoey was not the only transracial family member who traced their family origin story to ideas of unequal power relations. Hannah, a 35-year-old Korean international adoptee, said, "It makes me uneasy, international adoption. It's like, why wasn't Korea good enough? Who thought that America was inherently better?" Hannah expresses a connection between international transracial adoption and American exceptionalism. American exceptionalism relies on the idea that the United States has a special character based on democratic ideals and meritocracy that makes it a superior nation (Lipset 1996; Madsen 1998). This idea pervades humanitarian work, which strives to give residents of countries in the Global South the resources to lift themselves up to the (supposed) superior level of the United States. Although commonly regarded of as an ideology relegated to the public sphere, the experiences of transracial family members show how American exceptionalism is also translated into discourses related to domestic and family life. Indeed, nationalism has been pointed to as a major motivating factor, especially within the earlier adoptions of children after the Korean War "by providing the American government with the language of love and family to explain what looked like imperialistic activity in Asia" (Oh 2005, p. 181).

One of the ways that American exceptionalism is highlighted within transracial adoption discourse is through the retelling of transracial adoptee's origin stories, with a focus on the conditions that transracial adoptees stemmed from. Transracial family members

reported uneasiness regarding the way in which other societies and standards of living were framed as inferior, and especially the ways in which this impacted how adoptive parents taught about the origins of their adopted child. For example, Dylan, a 47-year-old white sibling to a Colombian international adoptee recounted:

My parents, they are intelligent and really caring people, but they probably just thought the typical sort of, "Well, America is the greatest place on Earth. So, we want you to understand where she is coming from, but she's coming here and is now going to be in America, so there is no need to think more about Colombia".

The perspectives of these transracial family members illuminate the tension that surround transracial adoption. Whereas some transracial family members embraced transracial adoption as a form of humanitarianism, for other transracial family members, humanitarianism itself pointed to the inequality at the foundation of transracial adoption.

4.2. Recreating, Reclaiming, and Resisting

Understanding their family origin as a form of humanitarian project had an effect on transracial family members, regardless of if they themselves perceived that association with humanitarianism positively or negatively. Transracial family members developed three responses to the conceptualization of their family as an outcropping of humanitarianism: recreating transracial adoption as humanitarianism within their own lives, reclaiming their family as separate from humanitarianism, and resisting the humanitarian aspects of transracial adoption altogether.

The first response that participants had to the humanitarian aspects of transracial adoption was to embrace the linkage and to recreate adoption as a humanitarian act within their own lives. This response was more likely among transracial family members that recalled their relationship to adoption fondly. Adeline, a 32-year-old Colombian international adoptee, stated, "I would love to adopt a child, ideally from Colombia, or somewhere in South America. I just know how it helped me, what was afforded to me, from my parents. So, I'd like to offer the same". Similarly, Piper, a 48-year-old white sibling to Korean international adoptees, explained:

We are actually in the process of adopting internationally ourselves. I just think it was so special to grow up like I did, how our family helped my sisters. So, my husband and I talked about it and we decided we wanted to do it to. And it was important it was international, to me.

For transracial family members like Adeline and Piper, transracial adoption is an altruistic action that would like to recreate within their own parental choices. Both use the language of "helping" to explain the value of transracial adoption and explain why they themselves would like to become adoptive parents.

Re-creation was not only reserved for transracial family members with experience of international adoption. Chloe, a 21-year-old Black domestic adoptee, said, "I am not sure if I want to adopt myself, but I do always want to be really involved in the adoption community. It's just something I always see myself supporting in all the ways that I can". Although Chloe is unsure if adoption will factor into her own parenting choices, she still believes in supporting transracial adoption through being involved in various communities that advocate for transracial adoption.

The second response aimed at trying to uncouple humanitarianism from transracial adoption was often spurred by transracial family members wishing to find out more information out their own or their family member's racial, cultural, or ethnic genealogies. This response often stemmed from transracial adoptees who felt that transracial adoption impacted their identity in meaningful ways. In this process of exploration, transracial family members reframed this process as a chance to reclaim their identity from being associated with the wider project of humanitarianism. Nathaniel, a 44-year-old Black domestic adoptee, said:

I really wanted to learn more about my Blackness, so I chose to go to [a Historically Black University]. It was my chance to kind of reclaim that part of me, instead of just the white bubble I grew up in that viewed me as a charity foster kid.

Nathaniel explicitly expresses that his choice to enroll at a HBCU was driven by his desire to uncouple his status as a transracial adoptee from those that viewed him as a “charity foster kid”. His solution is to explore more about his racial identity. Julian, a 32-year-old Korean international adoptee, also expressed value on understanding his background, explaining:

I took Korean lessons, and I just did a homeland tour there. It was important for me to see where I came from in order to understand that part of me, and why I was brought to the United States.

Nathaniel and Julian echo previous research that has documented the importance of racial socialization for transracial adoptees, with particular emphasis on the benefits of immersion in communities and organizations of color (Goss et al. 2017; Laybourn 2021). But their responses go beyond understanding their contact with their racial groups as a form of racial socialization or identity exploration. Instead, they both also reference that their social and cultural experiences were part of a larger project of reclaiming their identities through questioning some of the ideologies of transracial adoption.

White siblings of transracial adoptees also took part in this reclaiming response. Ivy, a 20-year-old white sibling to an international Filipina adoptee, stated:

I really wanted to get to know more about [my sister’s] culture, as something we could do together. So, we really set out to explore. We went to eat Filipino food at a restaurant in [the city] and then we learned how to make lumpia together. We really want to take a trip together to the Philippines. It’s special, because she’s learning about her identity and her heritage and I get to be a part of it. And, in some ways, it’s, like, my family culture too, you know? It shouldn’t just be the bad stuff about the Philippines and why she was at an orphanage that we know about.

Like Nathaniel and Julian earlier, Ivy also sees her identity as influenced by her family’s history with transracial adoption. Additionally, Ivy also works to reclaim the narrative around the origin of her sister’s international adoption by highlighting the positive cultural artifacts that can be associated with the Philippines.

The final response that transracial family members have to the concept of transracial adoption as a humanitarian project is to resist the linkage between the two altogether. That is, some transracial family members choose to directly challenge any notions of transracial adoption as an act of humanitarianism, as opposed to embracing or reframing the association. This response was more common with transracial family members who had a negative perspective on their family’s history with adoption. Some family members pointedly critiqued the system of transracial adoption and, in so doing, called into question the humanitarian outcome of adoption that many espouse. For example, Sadie, a 27-year-old white sibling to a biracial domestic Black and Korean adoptee, said:

The more I’ve learned about adoption, especially transracial adoption, the more it makes me cringe that I’m part of it. In college, I wrote a paper about it and learned about the objections to transracial adoption, and I was just like, oh my God, those criticisms, those are about my parents to a tee. So, I feel almost like an advocate against transracial adoption now. I just think we should try to keep biological families together as much as possible. Like, I’d rather donate money so parents can parent their children and get the help they need.

Sadie describes herself as “an advocate against transracial adoption now” and suggests ways in which the adoptive system may be changed in order to provide humanitarian aid that would address the issues leading to the need for transracial and international adoption in the first place.

As opposed to general critiques of the transracial adoptive system, other transracial family members resisted the notion of transracial adoption as a humanitarian project within their own family relationships and interactions. For these transracial family members, the association between transracial adoption and humanitarianism had severed their family formation. Tomás, the Latino adoptee, explained:

My parents and I are estranged, and I do think adoption is a big part of why. I know they were just doing what they thought was best, but I can't get over how mad I am about how they raised me to be completely white. I can't imagine making up with them unless they really came to terms with how wrong the whole system is.

These three responses underscore the widespread narrative about transracial adoption as a humanitarian project that transracial families must contend with and showcase the varying pathways that transracial families may take in so doing. Although transracial adoption is associated with humanitarianism, the ways in which that association takes shape varies depending on the type of adoption and the race of the family members involved. This, therefore, impacts how transracial family members themselves understand and interpret their family identity as part of a larger humanitarian project.

5. Conclusions

The experiences of these transracial family members interviewed within this study afford insight into how transracial family members make meaning of the notion of transracial adoption as intrinsically linked with humanitarianism. In a social world that acknowledges the bevy of material (Oliver and Shapiro 2019) and psychological (Taylor Phillips and Lowery 2018) privileges that stem from being associated with whiteness, it follows that families and outsiders alike believe that racially minoritized children will benefit from being allied with a white family through transracial adoption. As shown, transracial family members have varying perspectives of how to understand this ideology of transracial adoption as a form of humanitarianism. Whereas some transracial family members embrace this notion and see their familial adoption story as aligned with their humanitarian values, others find this link uneasy and question the ideas that underly believing that transracial adoption is a humanitarian act. Transracial family members respond to this notion of their family as a humanitarian project in three ways: (1) they choose to recreate the ideology of transracial adoption as humanitarianism within their own lives; (2) they work to reclaim their identities and family adoption stories separate from humanitarianism; (3) they actively resist the humanitarian aspects of transracial adoption altogether.

These findings point to the continued salience that notions of humanitarianism have within transracial adoptive communities in the United States. Although widely acknowledged as essential in the foundation of the transracial adoption movement in the United States within the Cold War Period (Oh 2005, discussions of humanitarianism in contemporary adoptions have faded in recent years. Moreover, they show the ways in which ideals of humanitarianism are linked to multiple types of transracial adoptions within the United States. Due to international connotations of humanitarianism, previous research on the impact of humanitarianism and transracial adoption has focused almost exclusively on international adoption (Cheney 2014, 2021). Instead, these findings underscore how notions of humanitarianism stretch to include domestic transracial adoptions as well.

These findings also help to understand the promises and pitfalls of mixed family formations. Although some may presume that families that are formed across racial lines may be more racially liberal through their desire to “embrace diversity” (Tessler et al. 2011), the experiences of the transracial families in this project show the ways in which that desire can stem from ideologies rooted in colonialism and racism. This finding gestures at the diversity of thought that exists within transracial families formed through adoption. The label of transracial families encapsulates a wide variety of demographic backgrounds, adoption types, and racial ideologies, which leads to different outcomes in how transracial family members approach and understand transracial adoption.

Moreover, these findings help to point to the tension surrounding the intersection of altruism and domestic life. It is essential to question the ways in which acts, which may initially seem to provide valuable benefits to individuals and society, may actually work in further entrenching systems of inequality. The experiences of these transracial families echo other types of family behaviors and practices that collide with notions of humanitarianism, such as families built through global surrogacy (Cheney 2021; Rudrappa and Collins 2015) and families who engage in voluntourism (Germann Molz 2016, 2017).

Future research on transracial adoption would do well to further examine the role of humanitarianism within transracial families. To supplement this work, researchers should investigate potential transracial adoptive parents or newly formed transracial families in order to understand if and how their notions of humanitarianism may be linked to the drop in international adoptions. Moreover, methodologies such as participant observation may be able to better capture why and how transracial adoptive families respond to notions of humanitarianism in differing ways.

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