

**Navigating Transracial Adoption: Black Adoptees' Experiences of Racism, Identity,
and Belonging when Growing Up in White Families**

Department of Psychology, University of Twente

Carmen Flokstra (S2782731)

Supervisor: Yudith Namer

2nd Supervisor: Gerben Westerhof

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Abstract

Introduction: This study explores how Black transracial adoptees raised by white parents describe their experiences with racism, identity development, belonging, and mental health, and how their white adoptive parents reflect on their own awareness and limitations in offering support. *Methods:* Using a qualitative approach, the study involved a secondary analysis of 11 short documentary videos featuring narratives of Black transracial adoptees and white adoptive parents in the United States. The data was coded and analysed in Atlas.ti through a framework analysis using both predefined and emerging themes, such as experiences of racism, emotional distress, white parents' awareness, racial identity, and the complex impact of transracial adoption. *Results:* Black transracial adoptees often encountered racism, identity confusion, and feelings of exclusion. These experiences led to emotional struggles, including sadness, anger, and feeling alone. While some white adoptive parents acknowledged their initial lack of preparedness and later engaged in active learning, others expressed regret over missed opportunities to support their children's racial identity. *Discussion:* This study highlights the importance of racial socialization, cultural connection, and mental health support for Black transracial adoptees. To support these Black transracial adoptees, white adoptive parents and professionals need to talk about race, prepare better, and help adoptees stay connected to their culture.

Keywords: Black Transracial Adoptees, Racism, Identity Development, Mental Health, White Adoptive Parents, Racial Identity, Belonging

Introduction

Imagine growing up in a family where no one looks like you. For many Black adopted children raised by white parents, this is a daily occurrence. Transracial adoption is the term used to describe this circumstance, in which children are adopted by parents of a different race (Smith et al., 2011). Transracial adoption can happen through foster care, private domestic adoption, and international adoption (Goss, 2022). In other words, children can be adopted across racial lines within the same country or from another country.

While this study focuses specifically on Black children who were raised by white parents living in the United States, understanding the broader context helps explain how adoption and race are connected. Most transracial adoptions in the United States involve white parents adopting children of colour, especially Black children (Marr et al., 2017; Perry, 2011).

Transracial adoption is also connected to global power differences. Some researchers believe that adoption reflects coloniality, where powerful countries have control over weaker ones. This control can also occur in a way that is less obvious, for example, through technology, culture, or organizations. This is called “neocolonialism,” a more hidden form of colonialism (Goss, 2022). Transracial adoption often occurs between wealthier and less wealthy countries, with receiving countries such as the United States adopting children from countries like China and South Korea, which were less wealthy at the time of high international adoption rates, as well as from economically disadvantaged countries, such as Colombia, Ethiopia, India, and Guatemala (Bartholet, 1993). This process raises ethical concerns about treating children as commodities, as well as the unfair conditions that make some families feel they have no choice but to give up their children for adoption.

This study focuses on Black adoptees adopted by white parents living in the United States, whether the children were adopted from within the country or from other countries. It also reflects bigger issues that affect how adoption works and shape discussions about race, identity, and belonging. It shows both the humanitarian intentions and the injustices built into the practice. While some view transracial adoptions as a charitable act that provides children with access to material needs, emotional support, and social resources they might otherwise lack (Khanna & Killian, 2015), others criticize that it is an unequal practice that separates children from their families, communities, and cultural heritage (Cawayu & De Greave, 2022).

Transracial adoptees face challenges that go beyond typical adoption-related issues, particularly in the areas of racism and identity formation. Typical adoption-related issues include attachment difficulties, feelings of loss and grief from being separated from the biological family, and struggles with identity development (Feeney et al., 2007). However, for Black transracial adoptees, these difficulties are exacerbated by racial differences that make their transracial adoption visibly noticeable. Because Black transracial adoptees look different from their adoptive families, for example, their difference in skin colour, they are frequently subjected to societal scrutiny, racism, and microaggressions, which can reinforce feelings of inferiority and exclusion (Baden, 2016; Richardson & Goldberg, 2010).

Racism includes more than just hateful words and unfair actions; it is a system that gives more value and power to some groups of people while treating others as less important. Over time, people have been placed into racial groups through a process called racialization, where certain races, especially Black and other minority groups, are seen as inferior. These groups often face unfair treatment in areas such as schools, jobs, housing, and healthcare (Hamed et al., 2022).

Today, racism does not always look obvious. While it used to be openly shown in laws and policies, modern racism often works in hidden or subtle ways, also known as microaggressions. Microaggression is a covert form of racial aggression that is subtle, often unintentional, verbal, behavioural, or environmental slights or insults that convey negative or discriminatory messages toward individuals based on their race or ethnicity (Levchak et al., 2018). While these actions may appear minor or harmless on the surface, their repeated occurrence can be psychologically harmful to the person targeted, contributing to feelings of marginalization, inferiority, and distress. Microaggressions are persistent and ongoing, creating an environment in which the victim constantly encounters discriminatory or stigmatizing experiences, often without the offender being fully aware of the impact of their actions (Levchack et al., 2018).

A common example of microaggression is when teachers or other adults assume that a Black adoptee in a white family must be an exchange student or foster child rather than a permanent family member. This assumption reinforces the idea that the child does not fully belong and must constantly explain their family dynamics. These microaggressions, rooted in both racial and adoption-related stigma, highlight the difficulty adoptees experience in navigating their identities. For Black adoptees, particularly those raised by white parents,

connecting with their racial or cultural heritage can be challenging, especially when their parents adopt a “colour-blind” approach that minimizes or ignores the realities of racism. This lack of preparation can leave adoptees vulnerable to racial and ethnic attacks, further complicating their sense of identity (Morgan & Langrehr, 2019). For many Black transracial adoptees, the tension between their racial and cultural background and being part of a predominantly white adoptive family becomes a complex and ongoing process.

Qualitative research from Smith et al. (2011) examined the challenges white parents face when raising Black children in a racially biased society. White adoptive parents are often unaware of the dominant racial frame they operate within, which makes them unprepared for the challenges of raising black children. This lack of awareness can lead to unintentional racism, shaping the Black adoptees’ experiences in ways that their parents may not fully understand. In contrast, Black parents actively engage in racial socialization, teaching their Black children strategies to cope with racism, fostering resilience and pride in their heritage (Smith et al., 2011). An important part of this racial socialization is “The Talk” (Whitaker & Snell, 2016), a conversation in which Black parents prepare their children for racial profiling and negative stereotypes, particularly in encounters with law enforcement, to avoid being hurt or killed by police.

However, while existing research has explored the preparedness of white adoptive parents in raising Black children, gaps remain in understanding the extent to which they recognize and address the racial challenges their children will face, as well as how well they are prepared to provide the necessary tools to help them cope. Studies indicate that many white parents fail to acknowledge the persistent nature of racism and its impact on their Black adopted children’s lives, leading to negative emotional and psychological consequences for Black adoptees (Smith et al., 2011). Their lack of racial socialization may leave Black children unprepared to navigate racism, limiting their coping strategies and potentially affecting their mental health.

Previous research also demonstrates that many parents who want to adopt transracially are unaware of the extra challenges involved, such as preparing the child to cope with racism and discrimination (Roberts, 2023). Furthermore, while many adoptive parents of Black children are limited by their own white perspectives, some, especially younger parents or those with monoracial children, are able to understand the complexities of raising Black children and turn that awareness into meaningful action and support (Goldberg et al., 2022).

Racism has serious consequences for mental health. Research from Paradies et al. (2015) suggests that repeated exposure to racism can lead to psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and symptoms of trauma. For Black transracial adoptees, these effects may be even more intense when they do not have parents who understand or validate their experiences.

There is a gap in understanding how transracial Black adoptees cope with racism and how their white parents' lack of experience with racism shapes their experiences. Research shows that white parents often lack racial socialization strategies (Smith et al., 2011) and may downplay or overlook racial differences in their adopted children's lives (Quiroz, 2007). However, there is little knowledge about how this lack of awareness affects the long-term mental health and identity development of Black transracial adoptees. Specifically, the emotional effects of being raised by white parents who struggle with conversations about racism remain underexplored. The relationship between racism, belonging, and family dynamics requires further research to understand its impact on the mental health and development of Black transracial adoptees.

This study aims to address this gap by investigating how Black transracial adoptees raised by white parents experienced their struggles with racism, identity, and belonging, and how, in their own views, their mental health is influenced by these challenges. It also explores how their white adoptive parents understand and talk about their own awareness and limitations in supporting their children through these experiences. Specifically, the research seeks to answer the following research question: "How do Black transracial adoptees raised by white parents describe their experiences with racism, identity, belonging, and mental health, and how do their white adoptive parents discuss their own awareness and limitations in supporting these experiences?" By analysing both the experiences of these Black transracial adoptees and the perspectives of their white adoptive parents, this research aims to provide new insights into the challenges faced by Black transracial adoptees and the role of parental support in navigating these challenges.

To explore this question, the study will use secondary data gathered from documentaries, using qualitative coding through Atlas.ti to identify themes in the narratives of Black transracial adoptees. The focus lies on specific narratives that reveal how Black transracial adoptees describe their encounters with racism as well as their struggles to understand their racial identity, especially when raised in white families who may have

limited racial awareness. These narratives also explore their sense of belonging. Additionally, this study will explore how these experiences affect their mental health. By identifying these themes, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the psychological and social impact of transracial adoption on Black adoptees.

Methods

Study Design

This study employs a qualitative research methodology with secondary data analysis to explore how Black transracial adoptees raised by white parents describe their experiences with racism, identity, belonging, and mental health. It also explored how their white adoptive parents spoke about their awareness and challenges in supporting their children. Qualitative research is suited for exploring specific social phenomena, such as transracial adoption, because it enables an in-depth understanding of personal experiences and perspectives (Mwita, 2022; Stutterheim & Ratcliffe, 2021). Instead of collecting new data, this study collected existing data mined through public short documentaries.

Materials

Documentaries

The data for this study came from short documentaries that were publicly available on YouTube. A short documentary (Liu ., 2023) is a non-fiction video that presents real stories about real-life situations, just like traditional documentaries. The main difference is the length: short documentaries are shorter and more focused, making them easier to watch, especially in today's media environment where people often prefer shorter content (Liu, 2023). Despite their shorter duration, they still aim to educate, inform, and raise awareness, and they often include interviews, real-life footage, photos, and narratives to tell a story (Bernard, 2022; Liu, 2023). Both short and traditional documentaries offer verbal and non-verbal cues, such as facial expression, tone of voice, and emotions, allowing for a more in-depth analysis of emotion, tone, and context (Gerdes et al., 2014; Liu, 2023). Throughout this paper, I will refer to these short documentaries simply as "documentaries".

For this study, transracial adoption is defined as the adoption of a child of one racial or ethnic group by parents of a different racial or ethnic group (Smith et al., 2011). This includes cases where Black children are adopted by white parents, which is the focus of this research. The data collection process began by identifying related terms in literature and media, such as 'Transracial adoption', 'White parents with Black children', 'Black adoptees', 'Transracial adoptees', and 'Transracial adoption and racism'. These keywords helped guide the search for relevant documentaries.

As part of the search strategy, eligibility criteria were established to ensure the relevance of the selected documentaries. Only documentaries published between 2010 and 2025 were used to ensure relevance to reflect current racial and mental health discussions. The 15-year timeframe was chosen because racial conversations changed significantly after the rise of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in 2013 (Lane et al., 2020). BLM was founded after the death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, who was shot and killed by a neighbourhood watch volunteer. The shooter claimed self-defence and was later found not guilty, which resulted in debates about racism and justice. Trayvon's death brought more attention to issues of systemic racism and racial identity (Lane et al., 2020).

Subsequently, narratives with detailed experiences about racism, identity development, and sense of belonging among Black transracial adoptees were gathered. Attention was given to how these individuals described the emotional and psychological impact of these experiences and the role of their white adoptive parents' awareness of racism. Documentaries that lacked the narratives of first-person Black adoptees or white adoptive parents with a Black child were excluded. Also, transracial adoption narratives that do not discuss racism or being Black in a white family were excluded.

A systematic search was conducted using the video streaming platform YouTube, to identify relevant documentaries. The following search terms were used: 'Transracial adoption', 'Racism and adoption', 'Identity struggles of Black adoptees', 'Mental health in transracial adoptees', 'Racial socialization'. These search terms were selected to ensure a comprehensive collection of data relevant to the research question. Additionally, variations of related terms of 'Racism', like 'Racialism', 'Discrimination', 'Racial discrimination', and 'Bias', were used to capture diverse terminologies used to describe racialized experiences.

The documentary selection process began with an initial search on YouTube, identifying 48 documentaries. During the first screening, 19 documentaries were excluded because of their irrelevance. Subsequently, the remaining 29 documentaries were reviewed based on eligibility criteria, resulting in the exclusion of 18 documentaries. After applying these criteria, a total of 11 documentaries were selected for the final analysis. These selected documentaries had a duration of approximately four to eight minutes in length.

The documentaries were created by a variety of sources, including news organisations, adoption groups, independent filmmakers, and one Black transracial adoptee who shared his own story. These documentaries show the experiences of Black transracial

adoptees, along with insights from their white adoptive parents. A complete list of the selected documentaries can be found in Table 1.

Data Extraction

After the selection of relevant documentaries, the data extraction process focused on gathering and transcribing relevant segments of the documentaries. The transcription was done using a program called DownSub (DownSub, n.d.), which allowed for the extraction of subtitles from the selected documentaries. Each subtitle file was downloaded and reviewed by watching the video alongside the text. When subtitles were inaccurate, corrections were made. These corrected transcripts were saved in a Word document and imported into Atlas.ti and organized for coding.

The documentaries included first-person narratives from Black transracial adoptees reflecting on their experiences with racism, identity development, and sense of belonging. Also, attention was paid to narratives that described how these experiences affected their mental health. These narratives were extracted and transcribed, focusing on verbal and non-verbal content. For the non-verbal content, I mainly focused on clear emotional signs, such as when someone was crying, smiling, or using tone of voice that expressed feelings. These moments helped add depth to the understanding of their stories. The data was broken down into smaller, meaningful units, such as quotes or descriptive passages, to allow for detailed coding. These codes were organized and stored in Atlas.ti for further analysis.

Atlas.ti

To analyse the data, Atlas.ti (version 25.0.1.32924) for Windows was used to generate the code report (see Appendix A). This software allows researchers to highlight pieces of text and code important parts, which are later organized and grouped into larger themes. Atlas.ti helps researchers keep their data in one place, which makes it easier to analyse (Soratto et al., 2020).

Data Analysis: Framework Analysis

The extracted data was analysed using a framework analysis, which combines both deductive and inductive approaches (Gale et al., 2013). This method allows researchers to approach the data with predefined themes, which are theory-driven, while remaining open to new themes that may emerge through the analysis process, called data-driven (Gale et al.,

2013). Framework analysis helps explore large amounts of qualitative data, such as documentaries, while allowing flexibility for unexpected findings (Gale et al., 2013).

Framework analysis is a structured but flexible way to organize and understand qualitative data. First, the transcripts were read multiple times to become familiar with the content and better understand the narratives. Subsequently, a software called Atlas.ti was used to go through each line, and codes were added to important parts of the text. For example, if a participant explained he accepted being different, the code might be “Acceptance and Disclosure”. After everything was coded, similar codes were grouped into bigger themes. For example, codes such as “Acceptance and Disclosure” and “Identity Search” were grouped under the theme “Racial Identity and Development”.

All the themes were placed into a matrix, as can be seen in Table 1. This matrix helped the researchers compare what different people said and find similarities and differences. Some new themes also arose from the coding. After this, the themes were reviewed again to find patterns and connections between them. This helped with answering the research question about how racism, identity, and belonging relate to mental health.

In the deductive phase, the following themes were identified in advance: 1) Experiences of racism and microaggressions, which describe how Black adoptees experience racism in their lives. 2) Psychological and emotional impact on Black adoptees, which focuses on how racism and transracial adoption affected the Black adoptees' emotional well-being. 3) Transracial adoptive white parents' racial awareness and limitations, which explores how much adoptive parents understand racism and how they respond to racial issues. 4) Racial identity development and belonging, which looks at how Black adoptees understand their racial identity and find a sense of belonging. These themes were identified through the literature of previous research on transracial adoption and racism, as well as frameworks such as the racial socialization theory. In the inductive phase, an additional theme, named the complexity of transracial adoption, emerged beyond the predefined themes through the coding process. The new theme was identified through a detailed review of the coded data and was later incorporated into the analysis to provide a deeper and more open-ended understanding of the adoptees' experiences.

From Analysis to Report

Once the data had been analysed, the process of writing the report began. Each theme and its related codes were reviewed to identify the most important and commonly occurring

patterns across all transcripts. Attention was paid to similarities, differences, and any unique or unexpected insights shared by the participants in the documentaries.

Quotations were carefully selected to support and illustrate each theme. These quotes were not chosen randomly; they were selected because they clearly represented the key ideas within a theme. Efforts were made to include a variety of voices, such as both white adoptive parents and Black transracial adoptees, to ensure that different perspectives and experiences were reflected in the findings.

Results

The analysis of the documentaries revealed several key themes related to the experiences of Black transracial adoptees. Using a hybrid framework analysis, four predefined themes were identified based on existing literature: 1) Experiences of racism and microaggression, 2) Psychological and emotional impact on Black adoptees, 3) Transracial adoptive white parents' racial awareness and limitations, and 4) Racial identity development and belonging.

During the coding process, one additional theme emerged from the data: 5) Complex impact of transracial adoption. This new theme provides further insight into the complexity of transracial adoption, highlighting aspects not explicitly captured in the initial framework.

The following sections present each theme in detail, illustrating it with relevant examples from the documentaries. Table 1 presents a framework matrix that was developed to organize and visually represent the large amount of data across the 11 selected documentaries (Gale et al., 2013). Each row in the table represents one documentary, and each column shows the theme found in the study. The quotes in the table are meant to be illustrative. They were chosen because they best represented each theme and clearly showed what participants, mainly Black transracial adoptees and white transracial adoptive parents, shared about their experiences. If a documentary did not include content related to a certain theme, this is shown with an "X" in the table.

The table highlights both the differences and similarities in participants' experiences. While Table 1 provides an overall thematic overview, the results offer a more in-depth narrative analysis. Not all quotes from the table are repeated in the text, and some quotes in the text do not appear in the table. Together, they provide a more complete picture of the findings.

Table 1

Framework Matrix

Documentary Title	Experiences of Racism and Microaggressions	Psychological and Emotional Impact on Black Adoptees	Transracial White Parents' Awareness and Limitations	Racial Identity Development and Belonging	Complex Impact of Transracial Adoption
Finding Identity: Growing Up a Transracial Adoptee	I would get made fun of all the time like oh your parents are white you're black you talk this way like why are you doing that.	I had to be on my own a lot.	There are things that black parents can give to black children that white parents can not give.	I couldn't hang out with the white kids because I'm not white I couldn't hang out with the black kids because I didn't talk black.	X
Transracial Adoption: a Family's Experience and Advice to those Considering Adopting Transracially	X	X	I became so conscious of when the world was white what was on posters what's on TV shows who's in my house you know I	The only part that that I had issues with when you're growing up it's all about being like everybody else you	X

			noticed things that I as a white person don't normally have to notice that's what white privilege is	don't want to stand out.	
Struggle for Identity: Issues in Transracial Adoption	X	X	X	X	Why you need a manual for me that you didn't have your other three kids.
Transracial Adoptions series: 'We Do See Color' (Ep 1 - TV version)	X	Adopted children can often feel lonely all like outsiders especially if they live in what they see as an all-white world.	X	Sometimes I'll walk into a class and the first like thing that comes to my mind is like is there like another black person in this room that I can like relate to it it's like looks similar to me.	X
Transracial Adoptions series: 'This Black Boy Did Not Want to be Black' (Ep 2 - TV version)	X	I would be shy of 25 before I could hear rap music and nothing something bad was about to go down.	That could have been you guys.	I was this black boy who didn't want to be black.	A lot of people forget that adopt these have a story before they come to you whatever it is that we have our own story.
Transracial Adoption series: Teacher & Mom Sees	I don't want to be your friend because you're black.	X	Look at the curriculum it's mostly white if you look at books, they're	X	There's extensive research on the subject it shows

'Institutionalized Racism' at School (Ep 3)

mostly white and all of these things just disenfranchise our kids of colour year after year after year.

adopted children are more likely to have learning and behavioural issues than other students.

Transracial Adoptions
Series: Police Beating Left Him 'Permanently Altered' (Ep 4)

I asked if I could see a warrant before they continued searching my car however these officers immediately became irate and began to punch me in the face.

That night and it totally changed the trajectory of my life.

His parents blame themselves for not being able to protect Alex they wonder if they should have known more.

I never really had the ability to distinguish my skin colour and how my skin colour was different from other folks around me.

Alex believes he would have faced the same risks if he was raised by African American parents, they are both of my parents you know, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

Transracial Adoptions
Series: After Finding Birth Parents, She Feels 'More Whole' (Ep 5)

X

X

I have felt like I can't be I can't do enough or be enough or I'm not the right person for her like what was I thinking that I could do this how could it be so arrogant to think I could like you know fulfil this role for her.

Finding my birth mom has helped me feel more whole and then just seeing someone who looked just like me my birth dad that was crazy.

Adopting a child of colour has another layer of complexity.

Transracial foster care:
What it's like to be white foster parents to Black children

X

X

We did that without really any significant knowledge on what exactly that would mean

I think my children have had to struggle as young adults with their

X

			to be white parents to black children.	own racial identity and issues around that.	
White Parents Who Raise Black Children	Strangers would come up to us and say oh he's going to be a great ballplayer, isn't he?	X	Are you going to allow some influence in his life from African American people I was kind of stumped for a second and then realized I absolutely have to.	He's always struggling with his own definition against a public definition is of him.	X
Adoptee Story: " I Didn't Know I Was Black Until You Told Me"	X	All the pain the tragedy the confusion are the very things that made me a better person.	X	I didn't know I was black.	X

Experiences of Racism and Microaggressions

Across documentaries, Black transracial adoptees talked about different encounters with racism, which happened in school and everyday places like sidewalks. These experiences ranged from peer rejection and stereotyping to police violence, revealing how race consistently shaped their social experiences. These experiences occurred in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

Racial Rejection by Peers

Something that was discussed multiple times across documentaries was that Black transracial adoptees felt excluded by both Black and white peers. Some were told they acted “too white” for Black communities and “too Black” for white communities. This often happened because they were raised in white families and sometimes acted or spoke differently than what others expected of a Black person. In the documentary ‘Finding Identity: Growing Up a Transracial Adoptee’, a Black transracial male adoptee shared:

“I would get made fun of all the time like oh your parents are white you're black you talk this way like why are you doing that.”

This quote reflects how the adoptee was positioned as “not Black enough” and “not white” either, revealing the racial boundaries enforced by peers. The idea of not fitting in also happened in another documentary called ‘Transracial Adoption series: Teacher & Mom Sees ‘Institutionalized Racism’ at School’, where a young Black female adoptee shared a moment, her best friend told her something another classmate said:

“She doesn’t want to be your friend because you're black.”

The girl felt hurt, left the classroom, and tried to leave school. Instead of receiving emotional support or being asked how she felt, she was punished by her teacher for leaving. This highlights how adults sometimes fail to protect children from racial harm.

Racial Stereotyping

Some Black transracial adoptees were judged based on stereotypes. In ‘White Parents Who Raise Black Children’, a white adoptive mother recalled something people said to her in public about her Black adopted son:

“Strangers would come up to us and say oh, he's going to be a great ballplayer, isn't he?”

This quote revealed how racialized assumptions overshadowed the adoptee's individuality. People assumed that the boy would be good at sports because he was Black. Instead of seeing him as an individual with his own interests, people saw him through a racial stereotype.

Racial Profiling and Police Violence

For some Black transracial adoptees, racism was not just words; it became physical and violent. In 'Transracial Adoptions Series: Police Beating Left Him 'Permanently Altered', a Black transracial male adoptee, adopted as a baby of two days old, recalled being violently assaulted during a traffic stop. He stated:

“I asked if I could see a warrant before they continued searching my car. The officers immediately became irate and began to punch me in the face. I could feel the gun pressed to the side of my head.”

This story showed how quickly it turned into violence after the adoptee asked a question about his rights. The police did not explain anything and became violent. He remembered how he was dragged across the grass and that he was badly injured. Photos in the documentary showed his face covered in blood. He also explained he could feel a gun pressed to his head. This part reflected how frightening the situation was for him, especially since he was just asking a question. His story showed how being seen as Black led to being treated as dangerous, even when he was calm and respectful.

These experiences of racism left a deep emotional impact. Across the stories, Black transracial adoptees described feelings of confusion, anger, sadness, and fear, emotions that often stayed with them.

Psychological and Emotional Impact of Transracial Adoption on Black Adoptees

The documentaries showed that racism and identity struggles affected the emotional and psychological health of Black transracial adoptees, with expressions of emotional distress and confusion, feelings of abandonment, isolation and loneliness, and trauma. They also shared how they coped with these feelings and how, over time, some of them found strength through their experiences.

Emotional Distress and Confusion

Several Black transracial adoptees talked about being emotionally overwhelmed, especially as they got older and became more aware of their identity. One Black male adoptee, adopted at nine months old, shared his experience in the documentary 'Finding Identity: Growing Up a Transracial Adoptee'. He said:

“That's when it really started to form my feelings of anger and sadness, and me being confused.”

As they became adolescents, many Black transracial adoptees noticed how they were treated differently by peers or adults and started to ask deeper questions about their identity.

Similarly, in the documentary 'Transracial Adoptions series: 'This Black Boy Did Not Want to be Black' (Ep 2 - TV version)', a Black male transracial adoptee shared how he had internal struggles with being Black and how growing up in a white family made it harder to understand his identity. These quotes point not just to momentary distress but to deeper struggles with self-understanding in racially isolated environments.

Feelings of Abandonment

Early separation from birth families contributed to long-lasting feelings of not being wanted. One Black transracial male adoptee, adopted at 13 months old by a white German couple, felt sad for a long time after being separated from his birth family. In the documentary 'Adoptee Story: " I Didn't Know I Was Black Until You Told Me"', he shared:

“When I was born, I was left in the hospital by my mother because of that, I always had the feeling of not being wanted.”

This quote reflected how early loss can lead to internalized feelings of worthlessness. Even though he was adopted and raised in a new home, the early separation made him feel like he was not good enough, and it gave him the feeling of not being loved. These feelings can last for years and shape how he sees himself and his self-worth.

Isolation and Loneliness

Another common feeling was loneliness. Several Black transracial adoptees described growing up in mostly white neighbourhoods or schools, where they often felt out of place. A Black male adoptee, adopted at nine months old, shared his experience in the documentary 'Finding Identity: Growing Up a Transracial Adoptee'. He said:

“I had to be on my own a lot.”

The documentary ‘Transracial Adoptions series: ‘We Do See Colour’ (Ep 1 - TV version)’, expresses it more broadly:

“Adopted children can often feel lonely, all like outsiders, especially if they live in what they see as an all-white world.”

These quotes demonstrated how racial differences within families and communities caused Black transracial adoptees to feel emotionally disconnected, even if they were physically surrounded by others. This loneliness these adoptees experience is often about not having people around who could relate to their experiences as Black transracial adoptees.

Coping Strategies

Black transracial adoptees found different ways to deal with their pain. Some developed behaviours that helped them survive but caused more problems. In ‘Adoptee Story: “I Didn’t Know I Was Black Until You Told Me”’, a Black male adoptee said:

“I was in and out of jail.”

This suggested that emotional issues, which are rooted in racial and adoption-related issues, may lead to behaviours aimed at escaping or expressing pain, especially when healthier coping strategies are not available.

Others coped by adjusting how they acted in different social situations. In the documentary ‘Finding Identity: Growing Up a Transracial Adoptee’ a Black transracial male adoptee engaged in so-called code-switching. This means he changed the way he talked or acted to fit in with different racial groups (Morrison, 2025). He said:

“I could code-switch, and I was able to maneuver my way around and get into those social groups.”

This showed he had to adjust himself depending on who he was around. This strategy helped in the moment, but could be exhausting and confusing over time.

Trauma and Life Transformation

For a few Black transracial adoptees, traumatic events changed their lives. In ‘Transracial Adoptions Series: Police Beating Left Him ‘Permanently Altered’ a Black transracial male adoptee described how a violent police encounter affected him:

“I’m a different person because of that night, and it totally changed the trajectory of my life.”

The documentary visually showed he had serious injuries. He had a lasting emotional pain, which was a consequence of being treated as dangerous because of race. This experience showed that it was not just a physical injury; it changed how he saw the world and himself. It affected his mental health.

Resilience and Growth

Despite the pain, some Black transracial adoptees found strength through their experiences. They described how their experiences helped them grow and gave them purpose. In ‘Adoptee Story: " I Didn't Know I Was Black Until You Told Me"', a Black male adoptee shared:

“I’m taking all that I have gone through in life and using it in a positive way. To show people you can do whatever you set your mind to, regardless of who you are.”

He also said:

“All the pain, the tragedy, the confusion are the very things that made me a better person.”

These quotes demonstrated post-traumatic growth, since he developed resilience and a purpose after difficult times. In the documentary, he wears a white T-shirt with the message, “I didn’t know I was Black until you told me.”. It showed how he turned his story into something meaningful, not just for himself, but also to inspire others.

Reflecting on these stories, many Black transracial adoptees shared that not only racism and rejection was the struggle, but also what it meant to be Black in a white family. Their white parents admitted they were not always prepared for the challenges their children encountered, which left adoptees with feelings of being unsupported.

Transracial Adoptive White Parents’ Racial Awareness and Limitations

Across the documentaries, many white adoptive parents started the adoption process with good intentions. However, over time, some realized they were not fully prepared for the challenges their Black children would encounter. This theme explores how white parents’ understanding of race grew or stayed limited, and how this affected Black transracial adoptees. In reviewing the documentaries, it became apparent that the narratives and insights

related to the parents' racial awareness and limitations were primarily told from the parents' point of view.

Although some Black transracial adoptees shared their experiences of race and identity, there was little to no direct reflection from adoptees about how they perceived or evaluated their white parents' racial awareness or limitations. This means that the theme centres on the parents' self-reported experiences and does not incorporate adoptees' views on their parents' handling of race and racism.

The parents' stories showed moments of acknowledging racial parenting limitations, recognition of white privilege, active learning, relying on community wisdom, colour-conscious parenting, defending the child, second-hand exposure to racism, fear of being replaced, and mistakes and regret. Some parents admitted they were not ready to handle racial issues, while others made efforts to learn and support their children.

Acknowledging Racial Parenting Limitations

Many parents admitted they were not prepared to raise a Black child. One mother in the documentary 'Finding Identity: Growing Up a Transracial Adoptee', shared:

"I felt unprepared, I felt like I didn't have the tools. That's what I did then was pour myself into figuring out how I should best parent this child who's going to have a very different experience than what I had and what Tim had."

This kind of honesty appeared in several documentaries. Parents recognized that love was not enough to parent a child of colour and that they needed to learn how to raise a child who would face racism, which they, as white people never experienced.

Recognition of White Privilege

Some parents became aware that, as white people, they had the privilege of not thinking about race, which is something their Black children could not ignore. One adoptive mother shared the following in the documentary 'Transracial Adoption: A Family's Experience and Advice to Those Considering Adopting Transracially':

"I became so conscious of when the world was white, what was on posters, what's on TV shows, who's in my house, you know I noticed things that I as a white person don't normally have to notice, that's what white privilege is."

This means that raising a Black child made her notice things she did not notice before. This awareness often came slowly and sometimes only after their child experienced something painful. It reflected that parenting a Black child made whiteness, which is something they did not have to think about before, more visible.

Active Learning

Some white parents tried to learn more. They read books or reached out to Black community members for guidance. After the tragic event of the killing of Michael Brown, one mother reached out for help. In 'Finding Identity: Growing Up a Transracial Adoptee', she said:

"I didn't want any black man to have to do the work for me, but I needed to hear from somebody who had the lived experience."

In 'White Parents Who Raise Black Children', a white adoptive father explained a similar experience where he explained:

"Are you going to allow some influence in his life from African American people? I was kind of stumped for a second and then realized I absolutely have to."

These moments of self-awareness showed that some parents recognized the importance of being open to outside perspectives, especially from individuals who had direct experience with racism. Both parents showed they had a willingness to move beyond their viewpoint and learn from someone who better understands racism and may have faced it themselves.

Colour-conscious Parenting

Instead of pretending race did not matter, some parents embraced their child's Black identity. One white adoptive mother in 'Transracial Adoptive White Parents' Racial Awareness and Limitations' said:

"It matters that he is a black man and that he understands that colour is seen and to say that all people are the same."

This way of not being colourblind is important for Black transracial adoptees, as it actively validates their racial identity in a world that often marginalizes them. This kind of approach was not common in all stories; some adoptees did not receive this affirmation about their skin colour while growing up. For example, in the documentary "I Didn't Know I Was Black Until You Told Me", a Black male adoptee shared he did not know he was Black. This reflected

that in some families, race was not talked about openly, which may have created confusion for the child.

Second-hand Exposure to Racism

White adoptive parents also shared that they did not fully understand racism until they saw it through their child's eyes. One mother in 'Transracial foster care: What it's like to be white foster parents to Black children' said:

“One of the blessings of that for me was the opportunity that it gave me to expand my own personal understanding of race and bias in that, in parenting my children, I got to experience from their eyes racism.”

While this might foster empathy, it also emphasized how parents' understanding of racism is frequently a secondary experience, observing their child's suffering rather than personally experiencing it, since it is a feeling they can never fully comprehend.

Fear of Being Replaced by Birth Parents

Some parents talked about feeling insecure when their child wanted to connect with their birth family. In “Transracial Adoptions Series: After Finding Birth Parents, She Feels 'More Whole' (Ep 5)”, one mother shared:

“I felt like maybe meeting her birth mother would kind of replace me, but Anson was interesting, and it became so deep that it helped me realize how important it was.”

This quote reflected the emotional tensions parents feel in the complexity that comes with transracial adoption. It showed that the mother first centred her own feelings. But later, she realized that it was important for her child to explore their identity, which marks growth.

Mistakes and Regret

Several parents openly expressed regret for not being more prepared or proactive regarding race when they adopted. In the documentary 'Transracial Adoptions Series: Police Beating Left Him 'Permanently Altered' (Ep 4)', the narrator said:

“His parents blame themselves for not being able to protect Alex; they wonder if they should have known more or done more.”

Such regrets indicated the growing awareness that even well-intentioned parents can fall short in preparing for the specific racial struggles their Black children face. These reflections

showed the gaps between a parent's intentions and the realities their children face, especially in a society where racism is common.

The experiences shared by white adoptive parents suggest they felt unprepared to raise a Black child. Others admitted they had not thought about race before adopting. Some parents started to understand racism after their child experienced racism. Parents also shared feelings like guilt or fear. These stories showed that as the parents' awareness of race changed over time, the way they supported their children also changed.

Racial Identity Development and Belonging

This theme focused on how Black transracial adoptees shaped their understanding of racial identity and where they felt they belonged. Their stories often included racial identity confusion, identity search and acceptance, and disclosure. Many adoptees explained they felt like they did not belong anywhere. Their stories showed affirmation through birth family, in-betweenness, racial mirroring, struggles with public vs. personal identity, and visibility.

Racial Identity Confusion

Some Black transracial adoptees did not understand they were Black until later in life. In 'Adoptee Story: "I Didn't Know I Was Black Until You Told Me"', a Black male adoptee shared:

"I didn't know I was Black."

His words showed that just seeing his skin colour was not sufficient for him to understand his racial identity. It required explicit explanation and conversation during his upbringing. This highlighted the gap between physical appearance and racial self-awareness.

In-betweenness

One Black transracial adoptee explained feeling caught between two worlds, not fully accepted by white people, and also not fully connected to Black communities. In 'Finding Identity: Growing Up a Transracial Adoptee', a Black male adoptee, adopted at nine months old, shared:

"I felt like I couldn't hang out with the white kids because I'm not white, I couldn't hang out with the black kids because I didn't talk black."

This quote revealed that he did not feel accepted by either group. Growing up in a white family shaped how he spoke or acted, which made it harder to connect with other Black peers.

Struggles with Public vs. Personal Identity

Some Black transracial adoptees talked about how others saw them and how they saw themselves. In the documentary 'Transracial Adoptions series: 'This Black Boy Did Not Want to be Black'', one Black male adoptee said:

“My own problems with identity for me has always been a problem, being black and being raised in a white culture from school to church to all my relationships.”.

This quote showed the internal conflict many Black transracial adoptees face between the racial identity imposed by society and the personal identity shaped by their upbringing. The white environment where he grew up influenced his sense of self and belonging.

Visibility

Some Black transracial adoptees became more aware of their race when they noticed that they looked different from their white adoptive parents. In the documentary Transracial Adoptions series: 'We Do See Colour' (Ep 1 – TV version)', an adoptive mother said:

“At ten, he just started to notice that people might be looking at us that we don't look like every other family in town.”

This quote showed that physical difference played a role in how adoptees became aware of their racial identity.

Racial Mirroring

Several Black transracial adoptees said it was important to see people who looked like them when growing up. Being surrounded by mostly white people made them feel out of place. In 'Transracial Adoptions series: 'We Do See Colour' (Ep 1 - TV version)', a Black transracial male adoptee said:

“Sometimes I'll walk into a class and the first like thing that comes to my mind is like, is there like another black person in this room that I can like relate to it's like looks similar to me.”

Another Black transracial male adoptee in ‘Transracial Adoption: a family's experience and advice to those considering adopting transracially’, said:

“It's extremely helpful to have neighbours that look like your kid if you're a white parent and adopting a kid of a different colour you got to have friends, he you got to have friends that look like your kid, and you have to have neighbours and people in their school that look like your kid.”

These stories showed the concept of racial mirroring, interpreted as an important factor for Black transracial adoptees to feel recognized and less like outsiders. Without these racial mirrors, they often felt like they did not fully belong.

Affirmation through Birth Family

Finding and meeting birth families provided important affirmation. In ‘Transracial Adoptions Series: After Finding Birth Parents, She Feels 'More Whole’’, one Black female adoptee, who grew up in a family where there were two biological daughters, shared:

“Finding my birth mom has helped me feel more whole, and then just seeing someone who looked just like me, my birth dad, that was crazy.”

Her excitement and smile in the documentary showed how important it was for her to see herself reflected in someone else.

Another adoptee in ‘Adoptee Story: " I Didn't Know I Was Black Until You Told Me"' said:

“My baby was here, she was the first person I met with my bloodline.”

These moments made Black transracial adoptees feel more connected to their identity and where they came from, highlighting the emotional significance of biological connections for identity affirmation.

Identity Search

Some Black transracial adoptees actively talked about trying to figure out who they were. In the documentary ‘Transracial Adoptions Series: After Finding Birth Parents, She Feels 'More Whole' (Ep 5)’, the narrator said:

“Maggie began to express questions about her identity.”

This showed that identity development was an ongoing process that began in childhood and continued over time.

Acceptance and Disclosure

Over time, many Black transracial adoptees felt more comfortable with their identity. In the documentary ‘Transracial Adoption: A Family's Experience and Advice to Those Considering Adopting Transracially’, a Black male adoptee said:

“When I was in college, I became more comfortable with being different and got into my skin and was cool with telling people up front that I was adopted.”

This story showed growth. As he got older, he gained more confidence in sharing his story and identity with others.

Across the documentaries, many Black transracial adoptees described confusion, self-doubt, or discomfort around their racial identity, especially when they did not have people around them who looked like them or shared their background. They shared feelings of not fitting in, being seen as different, or not knowing where they belonged. Some described how reconnecting with their birth family or meeting others with their background helped them feel more connected and less alone. In many stories, adoptees used words such as confused, lonely, or not whole when talking about how identity and belonging struggles made them feel.

Complex Impact of Transracial Adoption

In the documentaries, Black transracial adoptees shared that being adopted into white families affected them in different ways. Some had positive things to say about their adoptive families, while also talking about confusion, sadness, and mixed emotions. Their stories highlight the complexity and contradictions inherent in transracial adoption, including systemic challenges, colour and complexity in adoptive experience, mystery of adoption, and feelings of unequal treatment within families.

Emotional Ambivalence

Many Black transracial adoptees described having mixed emotions about their adoption. They had both positive and painful feelings about being adopted. One Black male adoptee shared the following in ‘Finding Identity: Growing Up a Transracial Adoptee’:

“My adoptive parents they passed on so many great qualities, at the same time, they're not my birth parents, and so it's different.”

This quote reflected the coexistence of love and loss, illustrating the emotional complexity Black transracial adoptees face.

Lifelong Identity Negotiation

Some Black transracial adoptees explained that adoption continued to affect them also after childhood. It was something they thought about throughout their lives. In ‘Transracial Adoptions Series: After Finding Birth Parents, She Feels 'More Whole' (Ep 5)’, one Black girl said:

“Part of my life is like a mystery to me.”

In the documentary ‘Finding Identity: Growing Up a Transracial Adoptee’, one mother reflected on her child’s experience:

“You can't hide from your child that part of themselves.”

This reflected that identity questions were always present and could not be avoided. The stories in the documentaries showed that adoption was not a one-time moment, but something that stuck with the adoptees throughout their lives.

Colour and Complexity in Adoptive Experience

Many Black transracial adoptees and adoptive parents described how race shaped their experience of adoption, adding emotional and social challenges. One mother shared the following in the documentary ‘Transracial Adoptions Series: After Finding Birth Parents, She Feels 'More Whole' (Ep 5)’:

“Adopting a child of colour has another layer of complexity.”

This showed that, beyond the challenges of adoption, raising a child of colour brought additional emotional and social challenges, especially because of racism, which white adoptive parents might not fully understand from their own experience.

Impact of Systemic Factors on Adoption

Some Black transracial adoptees faced struggles in school or with their behaviours. These problems were not only personal but were linked to big social systems. The narrator of

the documentary 'Transracial Adoption series: Teacher & Mom Sees 'Institutionalized Racism' at School (Ep 3)', shared:

“There's extensive research on the subject, it shows adopted children are more likely to have learning and behavioural issues than other students.”

This showed that adopted children, including Black transracial adoptees, are more likely to face challenges in school. These struggles come from the way they are seen and treated by others. This was also reflected in stories where parents pointed out that school materials, like books and curricula, were mostly focused on white culture.

Unequal Parenting Experience

Some adoptees noticed differences in how they were treated compared to their adoptive parents' biological children. In 'Struggle for Identity: Issues in Transracial Adoption', a Black transracial female adoptee talked about feeling different from her white siblings:

“I used to get very angry growing up when I would look at my dad's Den or my mom's bookshelf and see how to raise a black child, I'm like, why you need a manual for me that you didn't have for your other three kids?”

Her reaction showed how being treated differently, even though in a helpful way, can feel upsetting. The books made her feel like she was not one of the kids, but someone who needed different treatment because of her race. This feeling of being different caused frustration.

Black transracial adoptees often shared that their adoption came with mixed emotions. They talked about feeling different, not knowing parts of their story, or feeling treated unfairly within their families. For many, questions about their identity did not go away and became part of their lives. Being Black in a white family made these feelings more complex. Their stories showed that the impact of transracial adoption was long-lasting and caused emotional and mental stress.

Discussion

This study explored the experiences of Black transracial adoptees raised by white parents, focusing on their experiences with racism, identity development, belonging, and how these experiences shaped their mental health. For this exploration, a secondary analysis of data mined through documentaries was performed, where the following themes were identified: 1) Experiences of racism and microaggression, 2) Psychological and emotional impact on Black adoptees, 3) Transracial adoptive white parents' racial awareness and limitations, and 4) Racial identity development and belonging 5) Complex impact of transracial adoption.

The results of the theme “Experiences of Racism and Microaggressions” showed that Black transracial adoptees experienced racism from an early age. They were rejected by both Black and white peers, judged by stereotypes, and in some cases, faced violence from police. These experiences caused feelings of sadness, anger, and confusion, which support earlier research from Levchak et al. (2019). A significant contribution of this study is the insight that many Black transracial adoptees experienced these challenges without adequate support, amplifying their emotional distress and identity confusion. Their stories showed a sense of racial isolation, often intensified by silence or avoidance of racial discussions within their adoptive families. This highlights the need for white adoptive parents and institutions to talk openly about race and be prepared to support these Black transracial adoptees when they face challenges.

Many narratives in the theme “Psychological and Emotional Impact of Transracial Adoption on Black Adoptees” showed that Black transracial adoptees' emotional responses to racial isolation ranged from sadness and confusion to coping mechanisms. Although not all narratives directly mentioned mental health, many Black transracial adoptees described struggles that indicated psychological distress. These findings align with prior research indicating higher risks of mental health challenges among transracial adoptees, particularly when facing racism (Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2005; Keyes et al., 2013; Meyers, 2003). This current study adds to these findings by illustrating how a lack of racial mirroring can deepen adoptees' emotional struggles. The findings suggest that mental health support for Black transracial adoptees should be about trauma attuned to both adoption and racial identity.

The theme “Transracial Adoptive White Parents' Racial Awareness and Limitations” focused mainly on the perspectives of white adoptive parents. Many of them described

starting unprepared for the racial challenges their Black children faced. Their awareness of race grew slowly, sometimes only after their children experienced racism. Some parents tried to learn and support their children by acknowledging Black identity, while others struggled with guilt and mistakes. These findings confirm existing research that white parents often underestimate the challenges of raising Black children (Smith et al., 2011; Roberts, 2023). However, the documentaries did not include the perspectives of Black transracial adoptees on how they experienced their parents' awareness or support. This makes it difficult to fully understand how helpful these parental efforts were from the adoptees' point of view. While it appears that some white parents became more supportive over time, it remains unclear whether this improved their children's sense of identity or mental well-being. This gap highlights the need for future research that includes both perspectives.

The theme "Racial Identity Development and Belonging" revealed that Black transracial adoptees often felt confused about their racial identity, especially when race was not openly discussed in their adoptive families. Seeing people who looked like them and connecting with birth families helped them feel more whole. These connections played a key role in developing a positive racial identity. Over time, many grew to accept and embrace their identity. This study confirms past research on racial socialization (Smith et al., 2011; Barn & Kirton, 2012) and adds deeper stories on how Black transracial adoptees find belonging through racial mirroring and connections with birth family. This study emphasizes the importance of providing Black transracial adoptees with access to same-race mentors who can understand and guide them through racial struggles.

Across the theme "Complex Impact of Transracial Adoption" it appeared that Black transracial adoptees felt both love and pain about their adoption. Some reported feeling different within their families and struggled with the burden of adoption and racial identity challenges. A major finding is that race adds an extra layer of complexity to adoption. This study confirms earlier research that Black transracial adoptees often face identity and emotional struggles, especially when adoptive families do not acknowledge race or provide cultural support (Feeney et al., 2007; Baden, 2016). This study adds that Black transracial adoptees experience unequal treatment and barriers in school and other systems. Both Black transracial adoptees and white adoptive parents pointed to racial bias in schools and social systems that might lead to behavioural and learning difficulties. This shows why it is important for adoption systems to understand how race plays a role.

This study highlights the nature of race and adoption, showing that Black transracial adoptees often lack the tools and support needed to navigate racism and identity development in predominantly white environments. While some white adoptive parents become more racially conscious over time, this shift often occurs after Black transracial adoptees have already been hurt by racism. Positive identity formation is most likely when Black transracial adoptees have access to culturally affirming relationships, including same-race mentors and communities that reflect their racial identity.

This study has several limitations. Since this study used a qualitative analysis, the researchers' perspective can influence how themes are identified and interpreted (Mwita, 2022). The researcher of this study did not share the same racial or cultural background as the Black transracial adoptees, which may have led to misunderstandings or bias in the interpretation of the adoptees' experiences (Mwita, 2022). To reduce this risk, the researcher took time to reflect on their potential biases before and during the analysis. Also, the researcher tried to stay close to the original words of the narratives in the documentaries, using direct quotes.

Another limitation is that only one person did the coding and theme identification, which can reduce reliability since there is no second person to check or challenge how the data was interpreted (Reiss, 2023). To increase transparency, the researcher kept detailed notes during the analysis.

Furthermore, it was suggested in research by Gerdes et al. (2014) that visual emotional cues in documentaries can dominate the perception of auditory information. This potentially results in a biased interpretation of the narrative being told, as visual elements might overshadow the verbal content (Gerdes et al., 2014). In this study, for example, an adoptee was smiling while talking about a difficult experience. This initially led the researcher to interpret the moment as more positive than it truly was. Upon reviewing the documentary and reflecting further on the verbal content, it became clear that the story was emotionally complex and not positive.

Additionally, documentaries reflect the choices of the filmmaker, which means some experiences may be highlighted while others are left out. This may influence the way experiences are portrayed, resulting in bias or incomplete representation of the experiences (Nichols, 2024). The documentaries in this study came from various sources: news organizations, adoption groups, independent filmmakers, and one Black transracial adoptee.

Most were made by white-led institutions, which may have shaped the focus toward awareness and adoptive parents' growth. This could result in more positive portrayals, while critical or painful experiences may have been underrepresented.

Also, documentaries usually focus on a small number of people or specific situations, which potentially makes the findings of this study not applicable to all Black transracial adoptees. In research, this is known as low external validity, meaning that the findings do not fully represent the larger population (Yin, 2009; MethodMcr, 2012). In this study, most of the Black transracial adoptees were male, so female perspectives were underrepresented. Also, some experiences, such as adoption-related trauma, may apply to all adoptees, not just those in transracial adoptions. This can make it harder to tell which challenges are about being adopted and which are about being a Black child raised in a white family.

Lastly, self-selection bias may have affected this study. Self-selection bias happens when certain individuals are more likely to choose to participate in a study, leading to a non-representative sample (Elston, 2021). In this study, Black adoptees who were open to sharing their stories publicly may have had particularly strong opinions or intense experiences, while more neutral or positive experiences might be underrepresented. As a result, the findings may not fully capture the diverse range of experiences among Black transracial adoptees.

Despite these limitations, being transparent about the methods and interpretation of how potential biases were handled improves applicability and transferability to other contexts (Roller, 2017). Future research could benefit from including multiple coders, diverse researcher perspectives, and a wider range of participants' voices to strengthen the findings.

On the other hand, this study has several strengths. Firstly, the use of a qualitative framework analysis allows researchers to examine all data in an organized way. This helps ensure that all relevant information is considered, reducing the risk of bias and making the study more reliable (Baldwin et al., 2022; Schreier, 2012). Also, this study uses data from documentaries, which provide detailed personal narratives that might not be available through other research methods. Documentaries highlight voices and experiences that are often overlooked, which is important when studying Black transracial adoptees, as their struggles with racism and identity are often underexplored in research (Logendran, 2023). Another strength is the relevance of the data. Documentaries used for this study were produced after 2010, capturing current realities shaped by movements like Black Lives Matter and ongoing conversations about race and identity.

While this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of Black transracial adoptees, further research is needed to better understand their lives. A useful way to do this is by conducting longitudinal studies to track the racial identity development and mental health of Black transracial adoptees over time. This method helps with exploring how racial identity evolves from childhood to adulthood and explores the long-term effects of transracial adoption on mental health. Longitudinal research from Hu et al. (2017) found that adoptees' sense of identity changes with age, and that parents have less influence once children become teenagers. Additionally, the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHD) (2017) highlights the importance of examining identity from different angles, including personal, family, and societal levels, to get a full picture of how adoptees are affected.

Another interesting path to explore is to compare the experiences of Black transracial adoptees raised by white parents with those raised by Black parents. This would help to show the differences in how identity, belonging, coping strategies, and mental health outcomes develop in each group. Previous research from McRoy et al. (1982, 1984) found that both groups had similar self-esteem, but transracial adoptees often had more difficulty forming a strong Black identity. When white parents ignored race, it sometimes caused Black transracial adoptees to feel confused about their racial identity. But those who had greater exposure to the Black culture and role models showed stronger racial confidence.

Additionally, this study raised an important question: if some experiences described, such as being rejected by peers or racially profiled by police, are specific to being adopted, or are they common to many Black people? The stories where a classmate did not want to be friends because she is Black or where someone is violently attacked by police are very painful but happen to Black people regardless of adoption status. What may be different for transracial adoptees is how they process these experiences, especially if their white parents are not prepared to talk about race or offer emotional support. Future research should explore how parental race and preparedness shape the way adoptees experience and cope with racism.

Another recommendation is to explore gender differences in future research. While this study included both stories from male and female adoptees, it did not focus on how their gender may have shaped their experiences. It is possible that Black males, for example, face different kinds of stereotyping or are more at risk of violence and profiling, while Black

women may deal with more invisibility. Understanding how gender interacts with race and adoption can help create more tailored support for transracial adoptees.

Finally, future studies should explore the effectiveness of mentorship and community-based programs in supporting Black transracial adoptees. In this study and the study from Benoit et al. (2018), Black transracial adoptees shared that having same-race mentors and spending time in Black communities helped them feel more confident, safe, and proud of their identity. Black adoptees in the study from Roberts (2023) encouraged white adoptive parents to integrate their Black children into Black spaces and provide long-term Black mentors to support their identity development and aspirations. Understanding the processes by which these supports promote development will provide useful recommendations to white adoptive families and professionals.

A recommendation for practice is that adoption agencies and professionals must provide better education and resources for white adoptive parents before and after adoption. White parents need to learn about racism, identity, and how to talk about these topics with their children. It is also important to offer Black transracial adoptees access to Black mentors, opportunities to connect with the Black community, and mental health services that understand both race and adoption. These support groups can help Black transracial adoptees feel understood, valued, heard, and proud of their identity.

In conclusion, race and adoption are deeply intertwined. This study reveals that Black transracial adoptees face unique challenges that are often overlooked or inadequately addressed. To support their full development, both adoption professionals and white adoptive parents must acknowledge and respond to the realities of race. Ensuring that Black transracial adoptees feel seen, supported, and affirmed requires more than love; it means being aware, getting prepared, and staying committed to helping them stay connected to their culture and identity.

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Appendix A Code Report

Project: Coding Final Racism

Report created by Carmen Flokstra on 04/06/2025

Code Report – Grouped by: Code Groups

All (32) codes

Complex Impact of Transracial Adoption

6 Codes:

- **Adoptoin as Mystery**

1 Groups:

Complex Impact of Transracial Adoption

1 Quotations:

1:83 ¶ 802 in Transcripts documentaries

part of my life is like a mystery to me

- **Colour and Complexity in Adoptive Experience**

1 Groups:

Complex Impact of Transracial Adoption

1 Quotations:

1:49 ¶ 820 – 822 in Transcripts documentaries

adopting a child of color has

another layer of complexity

- **Emotional Ambivalence towards Adoption**

1 Groups:

Complex Impact of Transracial Adoption

2 Quotations:

1:11 ¶ 3 in Transcripts documentaries

my adoptive parents they passed on so many great qualities at the same time
they're not my birth parents and so it's it's different

1:42 ¶ 778 – 786 in Transcripts documentaries

Alex believes he would
have faced the same risks if he was
raised by African American parents he
both of my parents you know and I
wouldn't have it any other way

- **Impact of Systemic Factors on Adoption**

- 1 Groups:**

- Complex Impact of Transracial Adoption

- 1 Quotations:**

- 1:35 ¶ 516 – 524 in Transcripts documentaries**

- there's extensive
research on the subject it shows adopted
children are more likely to have
learning and behavioral issues than
other students

- **Lifelong Negotiation of Adoption**

- 1 Groups:**

- Complex Impact of Transracial Adoption

- 2 Quotations:**

- 1:28 ¶ 402 – 410 in Transcripts documentaries**

- a lot of
people forget that adopt these have a
story before they come to you whatever
it is that we have our own story and
this was my story

- 1:78 ¶ 3 in Transcripts documentaries**

- you can't hide from your child that part of themselves

- **Unequal Parenting Experience**

- 1 Groups:**

- Complex Impact of Transracial Adoption

1 Quotations:

1:81 ¶ 16 – 20 in Transcripts documentaries

why you need a manual for
me that you didn't have your other three
kids

Experiences of Racism and Microaggressions

3 Codes:

● Racial Profiling and Police Brutality

1 Groups:

Experiences of Racism and Microaggressions

2 Quotations:

1:38 ¶ 676 – 686 in Transcripts documentaries

I asked if I could
see a warrant before they continued
searching my car
however these officers immediately
became irate and began to punch me in
the face

1:39 ¶ 708 – 714 in Transcripts documentaries

I received 45 stitches I was
treated for a broken nose diagnosed with
a concussion and later with a brain
injury

● Racial Rejection by Peers

1 Groups:

Experiences of Racism and Microaggressions

3 Quotations:

1:29 ¶ 432 – 434 in Transcripts documentaries

I don't want

to be a friend because you're black

1:69 ¶ 3 in Transcripts documentaries

i would get made fun of all the time like oh your parents are white you're black you talk this way like why are you doing that

1:82 ¶ 446 – 448 in Transcripts documentaries

kids were calling her

out for the color of her skin

- **Racial Stereotyping**

1 Groups:

Experiences of Racism and Microaggressions

1 Quotations:

1:54 ¶ 1472 – 1484 in Transcripts documentaries

strangers would come up to

us and say oh he's gonna be a great

ballplayer isn't he at some point I

would say why because he's black at

other points I just got fed up with it

and said no he said

gonna be a brain surgeon it is stunning

Psychological and Emotional impact on Black Adoptees

6 Codes:

- **Coping Strategies**

1 Groups:

Psychological and Emotional impact on Black Adoptees

2 Quotations:

1:4 ¶ 3 in Transcripts documentaries

i could code switch and i was able to maneuver my way around and get into those social groups

1:59 ¶ 1722 – 1724 in Transcripts documentaries

I was in and out of jail which led
me to change my path

- **Emotional Distress and Confusion**

1 Groups:

Psychological and Emotional impact on Black Adoptees

3 Quotations:

1:25 ¶ 306 – 312 in Transcripts documentaries

I would be shy of 25
before I could hear rap music and
nothing something bad was about to go
down

1:70 ¶ 3 in Transcripts documentaries

feelings of anger and sadness and me being confused

1:71 ¶ 3 in Transcripts documentaries

it didn't really take a toll on me until probably high school

- **Feelings of Abandonment**

1 Groups:

Psychological and Emotional impact on Black Adoptees

1 Quotations:

1:61 ¶ 1650 – 1656 in Transcripts documentaries

when I was born I was left in the
hospital by my mother because of that I
always had the feeling of not being
wanted

- **Loneliness and Isolation**

1 Groups:

Psychological and Emotional impact on Black Adoptees

2 Quotations:

1:20 ¶ 176 – 182 in Transcripts documentaries

adopted children can often feel lonely

all like Outsiders especially if they
live in what they see as an all-white
world

1:68 ¶ 3 in Transcripts documentaries

i had to be on my own a lot

● **Personal Growth and Resilience**

1 Groups:

Psychological and Emotional impact on Black Adoptees

3 Quotations:

1:60 ¶ 1796 – 1802 in Transcripts documentaries

all
the pain the tragedy the confusion are
the very things that made me a better
person

1:62 ¶ 1724 – 1728 in Transcripts documentaries

even back then I
knew that one day I would write a book
about my life

1:63 ¶ 1808 – 1810 in Transcripts documentaries

I'm taking all that I've gone through in
life and using it in a positive way

● **Trauma and Life Transformation**

1 Groups:

Psychological and Emotional impact on Black Adoptees

1 Quotations:

1:40 ¶ 748 – 750 in Transcripts documentaries

that night and it totally changed the
trajectory of my life

8 Codes:

● Acceptance and Disclosure

1 Groups:

Racial Identity Development and Belonging

1 Quotations:

1:14 ¶ 6 in Transcripts documentaries

when I was in college I became more comfortable with being different and and got into my skin and was cool with telling people up front that I was adopted

● Affirmation Through Birth Family

1 Groups:

Racial Identity Development and Belonging

5 Quotations:

1:6 ¶ 3 in Transcripts documentaries

finding his birth mom was key to shaping his identity

1:7 ¶ 3 in Transcripts documentaries

she's african-american and i can talk to her in more depth about police brutality or being black in america because she gets i

1:26 ¶ 394 – 396 in Transcripts documentaries

his birth mother's memorabilia helped

Chad better understand his identity

1:45 ¶ 860 – 866 in Transcripts documentaries

finding my

birth mom has helped me feel more whole

and then just seeing someone who looked

just like me my birth dad that was crazy

1:58 ¶ 1776 – 1778 in Transcripts documentaries

she was the first person I met with

my bloodline

● Identity Search

1 Groups:

Racial Identity Development and Belonging

1 Quotations:

1:47 ¶ 846 – 848 in Transcripts documentaries

Maggie began to express questions
about her identity

● In-betweenness

1 Groups:

Racial Identity Development and Belonging

3 Quotations:

1:23 ¶ 298 – 302 in Transcripts documentaries

Chad's show makes it
clear that he wasn't comfortable in
exclusively white all-black worlds

1:66 ¶ 3 in Transcripts documentaries

couldn't hang out with the white kids because i'm not white

1:67 ¶ 3 in Transcripts documentaries

couldn't hang out with the black kids because i didn't talk black

● Racial Identity Confusion

1 Groups:

Racial Identity Development and Belonging

4 Quotations:

1:22 ¶ 280 – 282 in Transcripts documentaries

I was this
black boy who didn't want to be black

1:36 ¶ 628 – 634 in Transcripts documentaries

I never
really had a the ability to distinguish
my skin color and how my skin color was
different from other folks around me

1:43 ¶ 802 – 808 in Transcripts documentaries

part of my life is like a mystery to me

one minute I was born and I was with one
family I mean the next minute I was with
a different one

1:87 ¶ 1720 – 1722 in Transcripts documentaries

I didn't know I was
black

● **Racial mirroring**

1 Groups:

Racial Identity Development and Belonging

3 Quotations:

1:19 ¶ 218 – 228 in Transcripts documentaries

sometimes I'll walk into a class and the
first like thing that comes to my mind
is like is there like another black
person in this room that I can like
relate to it it's like looks similar to
me

1:79 ¶ 6 in Transcripts documentaries

it's extremely helpful to have neighbors that look like your kid if if you're a white
parent and adopting a kid of a different color you got to have friends he you got to
have friends that look like your kid and you have to have neighbors and and people
in their school that look like your kid

1:80 ¶ 6 in Transcripts documentaries

I wasn't I wasn't the only biracial kid

● **Struggles with Public vs. Personal Identity**

1 Groups:

Racial Identity Development and Belonging

3 Quotations:

1:52 ¶ 1076 – 1080 in Transcripts documentaries

i think my children have had to struggle
as young adults with their own racial
identity and issues around that

1:55 ¶ 1606 – 1610 in Transcripts documentaries

he's always struggling with his own
definition against a public definition
is of him

1:56 ¶ 1712 – 1722 in Transcripts documentaries

my own problems
identity for me has always been a
problem being black and being raised in
a white culture from school to church to
all my relationships I didn't know I was
black

- **Visibility**

1 Groups:

Racial Identity Development and Belonging

2 Quotations:**1:13 ¶ 6 in Transcripts documentaries**

the only part that that I had issues with when you're growing up it's all about being
like everybody else you you don't want to stand out

1:18 ¶ 164 – 170 in Transcripts documentaries

he's just
starting to notice that people might be
looking at us that we don't look like
every other family in town

Transracial Adoptive White Parents' Racial Awareness and Limitations**9 Codes:**

- **Active Learning**

1 Groups:

Transracial Adoptive White Parents' Racial Awareness and Limitations

2 Quotations:

1:74 ¶ 3 in Transcripts documentaries

that's what i did then was pour myself into figuring out how should i best parent this child

1:86 ¶ 1036 – 1040 in Transcripts documentaries

the opportunity that it gave me to
expand my own personal understanding of
race and bias

- **Aknowledging Racial Limitations**

1 Groups:

Transracial Adoptive White Parents' Racial Awareness and Limitations

5 Quotations:**1:37 ¶ 636 – 650 in Transcripts documentaries**

when you're Caucasian
parents you may go into it thinking on
some level that you understand the
concept of colorblindness and
superficially we were terrific but we
didn't understand what it's like to be
black in America what it's like to grow
up in a trans racial family

1:44 ¶ 822 – 834 in Transcripts documentaries

I have felt
like I can't be I can't do enough or be
enough or I'm not the right person for
her like what was I thinking that I
could do this how could it be so
arrogant to think I could like you know
fulfill this role for her

1:73 ¶ 3 in Transcripts documentaries

there are things that black parents can give to black children that white parents can not give

1:75 ¶ 3 in Transcripts documentaries

i felt unprepared i felt like i didn't have the tools

1:84 ¶ 956 – 962 in Transcripts documentaries

we did that without
really any significant knowledge on what
exactly that would mean to be white
parents to black children

- **Colour-conscious Parenting**

1 Groups:

Transracial Adoptive White Parents' Racial Awareness and Limitations

1 Quotations:

1:77 ¶ 3 in Transcripts documentaries

it matters that he is a black man and that he understands that color is seen and to
say that all people are the same

- **Defending Child**

1 Groups:

Transracial Adoptive White Parents' Racial Awareness and Limitations

2 Quotations:

1:33 ¶ 486 – 500 in Transcripts documentaries

he had tendencies to be violent
aggressive and disruptive Stephanie
insisted those labels be removed from
her son's specialized education plan I
went right to the special ed Department
said I want these taken off because this
is literally the school to Prison
Pipeline where we're talking about

1:54 ¶ 1472 – 1484 in Transcripts documentaries

strangers would come up to
us and say oh he's gonna be a great
ballplayer isn't he at some point I
would say why because he's black at

other points I just got fed up with it
and said no he said
gonna be a brain surgeon it is stunning

- **Fear of being Replaced**

- 1 Groups:**

- Transracial Adoptive White Parents' Racial Awareness and Limitations

- 1 Quotations:**

- 1:48 ¶ 886 – 894 in Transcripts documentaries**

- I felt like maybe meeting her
birth mother would kind of replace me
but Anson was interesting and it was so
deep became so deep that it helped me
realize how important it was

- **Mistakes and Regret**

- 1 Groups:**

- Transracial Adoptive White Parents' Racial Awareness and Limitations

- 2 Quotations:**

- 1:41 ¶ 772 – 778 in Transcripts documentaries**

- his parents blame themselves for
not being able to protect Alex they
wonder if they should have known more or
done more

- 1:72 ¶ 3 in Transcripts documentaries**

- i would find myself being tone deaf

- **Recognition of White Privilege**

- 1 Groups:**

- Transracial Adoptive White Parents' Racial Awareness and Limitations

- 3 Quotations:**

- 1:15 ¶ 6 in Transcripts documentaries**

I became so conscious of when the world was white what was on posters what's on TV shows who's in my house you know I noticed things that I as a white person don't normally have to notice that's what white privilege is

1:31 ¶ 546 – 554 in Transcripts documentaries

you look at the curriculum it's mostly
white if you look at books they're
mostly white and all of these things
just disenfranchise our kids of color
year after year after year

1:32 ¶ 600 – 614 in Transcripts documentaries

how much institutionalized racism is in
our school structure is absolutely
phenomenal and I never had to realize
that before I had black kids and yet
this has been the truth for all black
families as far back as we can remember
but because I'm white I never had to I
never had to look at that

- **Relying on Community Wisdom**

1 Groups:

Transracial Adoptive White Parents' Racial Awareness and Limitations

2 Quotations:

1:53 ¶ 1376 – 1384 in Transcripts documentaries

are you going to allow some
influence in his life from
african-american people I was kind of
stumped for a second and then realized I
absolutely have to

1:76 ¶ 3 in Transcripts documentaries

i didn't want any black man to have to do the work for me but i needed to hear
from somebody who had the lived experience

- **Secondhand Exposure to Racism**

1 Groups:

Transracial Adoptive White Parents' Racial Awareness and Limitations

3 Quotations:**1:27 ¶ 350 – 352 in Transcripts documentaries**

that could have been you
guys

1:34 ¶ 458 – 466 in Transcripts documentaries

motherhood has
taught her some hard lessons about how
race can influence people's perceptions
of a student's behavior or academic
performance

1:85 ¶ 1044 – 1048 in Transcripts documentaries

in parenting my children i got to
experience from their eyes racism