

Families created through transracial adoption: Parents' and teachers' discourses at selected Gauteng schools.

By

Kelly J. Robinson

Supervisor

Professor Melissa Steyn

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand,
Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy (Critical Diversity Studies)

October 2018

Declaration

I declare that this is my own, unaided work. It has not been submitted before
for any other degree or examination at this or any other university.

Signature

Date

Abstract

Family is just family? This research sought to establish how the language which is used by parents of transracially adopted children, as well as the teachers who teach them, constructs the idea of family, through the language which is used within the conversations of these respective parties.

The research was conducted through semi-structured interviews with parents of transracially adopted children who had responded to a Facebook request for research participants. Teachers from four private, primary schools in Johannesburg formed the second set of interview participants. Applied Thematic Analysis was used to analyse the interviews, taking a narrative approach to interpret the stories that emerged.

It was within the gaps and overlaps in conversations with parents and teachers that the revealing content emerged. Two of the most telling aspects which arose in this research were the extent to which heteronormative privilege reaches within family units and extends into the school environment and school application process. The other aspect which arose and which was explored in various sections of the research was in fact race. Did parents consider this when they adopted transracially and how do they speak about race in conversations with their transracially adopted children? For teachers the question was how they engage in conversations about race in the classroom, taking into account all the possible dynamics at play, as well as considering the position of the transracially adopted child. Different stances and manners of interacting or retreating from the topic are elucidated.

This research found that there needs to be an ongoing conversation with all key role players involved in the process of adoption and specifically those involved in transracial adoption. The chasm between the theoretical ideas of what constitutes a family and the reality of what is expressed in relation to this dynamic needs to be bridged through the advancement and development of a sophisticated vocabulary which can be employed in future conversations.

Keywords: transracial adoption, South Africa, family, school, narratives.

Acknowledgements

To my supervisor, Professor Melissa Steyn, thank you for your support, guidance and encouragement throughout this research process.

I would like to acknowledge the financial support of the DST-NRF South African Chair in Critical Diversity Studies. Any opinion, finding and conclusion or recommendation expressed in this material is that of the author(s) and the NRF does not accept liability in this regard.

To the parents and teachers who willingly participated in my research, thank you.

Mom and Dad, thank you for your love and support.

To my *soul tribe* for your support, encouragement and willingness to listen while I processed my thoughts out aloud and for allowing me space to just ‘be’ when I needed a break, I am truly grateful – thank you.

Lastly, thank you to Calico, the cat, who spent many hours keeping me company during the writing process, usually seated in the middle of my research documents!

*For Johari & Isabelle,
with love and gratitude.*

Glossary

As there are certain terms which will be used throughout this research it is necessary to explain why the choice has been made to use these terms. Below is a list of the terms used and explanations for their use by the researcher.

Adoptive parents – people (single or couple) who have formed families through adoption. The researcher does not seek to draw differences between biological parents and those who become parents through adoption but for the purpose of clarity in this research, the term is applied.

Transracial adoption – (*also referred to as interracial adoption by some authors*). In this research, the term transracial is used in discussions by the researcher, as this is the term used by the Department of Social Development, the governmental department which regulates different aspects of the lives of children in South Africa. In this research, the term is used specifically to refer to white people who have adopted black children. In instances where interracial adoption is the term which has been used, is because it is the term which is used by the authors who are cited.

Black and white – these labels, which are used to refer to the children and people who adopt them, are used for the purpose of this research to refer to the broad, unspecified (i.e. White English, Black Xhosa) racial groups of people who are involved in the adoption process.

Public schools – (government schools). According to Independent Schools of South Africa (ISASA), a public school is one which is controlled by the State.

Independent schools – (private schools). According to Independent Schools of South Africa (ISASA), these are schools which are governed privately.

Table of Contents

	Page
Declaration	I
Abstract	II
Acknowledgements	III
Dedication	IV
Glossary of Terms	V
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
Chapter 2 Theoretical Framework	8
2.1 Family	8
2.1.1 The Motherhood Conundrum	10
2.1.2 Childhood	16
2.2 Adoption	17
2.2.1 The South African Welfare System	20
2.2.2 The Point of Intersectionality: Family, Race, Adoption and Identity Collide	23
2.3 School	31
2.3.1 The South African School System: A Historical Overview	31
2.3.2 Teachers and the Teaching Process	37
2.3.3 Beyond the Curriculum: School as a Place of Identity Formation	39
Chapter 3 Literature Review	42
3.1 Adoption	42
3.1.1 Who Adopts and Why?	42
3.1.2 Transracial Adoption	46
3.1.3 Adoption and Identity	49
3.2 Family	51
3.2.1 Family Forms	51

3.2.2.1 Single Parents	51
3.2.2.2 Heterosexual Parents	52
3.2.2.3 Same-sex Parents	53
3.2.2 Discussions about Adoption	53
3.3 Schools	58
3.3.1 Teaching the Teachers	58
3.3.2 Language, Integration and a Colour-Blind Stance	62
3.3.3 School and the Adoption Discussion	67
Chapter 4 Methodology	71
4.1 Methodological Approach	71
4.2 Data Collection	72
4.2.1 Sites of Research	72
4.2.2 Sources	72
4.2.3 Sample	75
4.2.4 Confidentiality and the Research Participants	76
4.2.5 Scope	77
4.2.6 Data Analysis	77
4.3 Applied Thematic Analysis	78
4.3.1 The Application of Applied Thematic Analysis	80
4.4 The Narrative Discussion	81
Chapter 5 Discussion	89
5.1 Parent Discussion	89
5.1.1 The Decision to Adopt Transracially	89
5.1.2 Discussions about Family and Adoption	94
5.1.3 The School Application	99
5.1.4 Society and the Broader Conversation	103

5.1.4.1 The Perceptions and Stereotypes	104
5.1.4.2 The Language Debate	106
5.1.4.3 A Space for Conversation	109
5.1.5 Race, Class and the Transracially Adopted Child	109
5.1.5.1 School Incidents	110
5.1.5.2 Class / Race Dynamics	111
5.1.5.3 Extended Family	115
5.2 Teachers and Comparative Discussion	116
5.2.1 Concept of family	117
5.2.2.1 Is Family Really Just Family?	119
5.2.2 Details at the Start of the Academic Year	121
5.2.2.2 More Than Just a School Application?	122
5.2.3 Curriculum Content	124
5.2.4 The Abandoned Baby Conversation	125
5.2.5 Are You Equipped To Have This Conversation?	127
5.2.6 Race Conversations	129
5.2.6.1 Ready, Steady, Race?	136
5.2.6.1.1.The Colour-Blind Position	137
5.2.6.1.2 Open and Willing to Talk about Race	138
5.2.6.1.3 Whiteness and the Race Conversation	140
5.2.7 Broader Society Conversation	144
Chapter 6 Conclusion	146
Reference List	153

Appendix	168
Table 1: Parent Interview Examples	168
Table 2: Teacher Interview Examples	169
Parent Participant Letter	171
Parent Interview Questions	172
Parent Consent Form	173
Teacher Participant Letter	174
Teacher Interview Questions	175
Teacher Consent Form	176

