

Domestic or International? Transracial Family Formation and Factors Affecting Adoption Decisions

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Abstract

As international adoption has become more prevalent, prospective adoptive parents now have more options – adopt a US-born child (domestic adoption) through various avenues or adopt a non-US born child (international adoption). Nevertheless, little research has been conducted on the similarities and differences in the pattern of transracial family formation and decision-making among those who adopt domestically and internationally. We therefore ask – how do the characteristics of the child and family predict transracial adoption for foster care adoption, private domestic adoption, and international adoption? We then ask, what factors are considered to be important among parents who decide to adopt either domestically or internationally? Preliminary analysis shows that international adoption is more likely to be a transracial adoption. The results also suggest that adoptive parents who place an importance on having a child whose race is the same as their family and having an infant are more likely to adopt domestically.

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In 2000, 2.5% of children aged under 18 years old were reported as adopted children in the United States (Kreider 2003). While adopting a child domestically has been a common practice of family formation, what is relatively new about American adoption practices is the emergence of adopting children from abroad. In the past several decades, the number of immigrant visas issued for adopted children has increased rapidly from 5,000 in 1980 to 19,000 in 2000 (Office of Children's Issues 2009; Selman 2002). One of the reasons for this sharp increase is attributable to the decline in the availability of children to be adopted in the United States (Tarmann 2003).

As international adoption has become more prevalent during the past few decades, prospective adoptive parents now have more options – adopt a US-born child (domestic adoption) through various avenues or adopt a non-US born child (international adoption). Domestic adoption can be adoption through agencies, independent adoption, or adoption through foster care. While race matching of adoptive parents and adopted children were practiced due to anti-miscegenation laws prior to the mid-1950s (Freundlich 2000; Moran 2001), the formation of transracial families through adoption is increasing. In particular, the recent institutionalization of international adoption is contributing to this increase. Nevertheless, little research has been conducted on the similarities and differences in the pattern of transracial family formation and the role of race in decision-making among parents who adopt children either domestically or internationally. Thus, the aim of this research is to answer the following questions: How do the characteristics of the child and family predict transracial adoption for foster care adoption,

private domestic adoption, and international adoption, and what factors are considered to be important among parents who decide to adopt either domestically or internationally? For instance, do adoptive parents place an importance on adopting children who are of the same race as them?

Like Berebitsky (2000), we begin with the premise that adoption is a site in which the culture at large works out its understanding about “family,” including the issue of who can be integrated into a family. We argue that parents who construct transracial families by adopting children of different racial origins illustrate the fluidity and tenacity of racial boundaries in a manner akin to adults who form interracial families by marrying across racial or ethnic lines. Prior research has shown that there were other attributes of the child besides race, such as the age, health status, and sex that prospective adopted parents appear to take into consideration for international adoption (Ishizawa, Kenney, Kubo, and Stevens 2006). Nevertheless, we have yet to examine the similarities and differences across various types of adoption with regard to the factors that prospective adoptive parents held important in making their decision, and the patterns of racial matching and mixing between adoptive parents and their adopted children. While many previous studies focused on one type of adoption or used data that is not nationally representative, the National Survey of Adoptive Parents allows us to compare domestic adoption and international adoption systematically.

The data for this research is the 2007 National Survey of Adoptive Parents (NSAP). The total number of children is 2,089. Since the NSAP data includes three types of adoption, there are 763 children who were adopted from foster care, 781 children who were adopted privately within the United States, and 545 children who were adopted from countries other than the United States. From hereon, the three types of adoption will be referred to as foster care adoption, private domestic adoption, and international adoption respectively.

First, we will use logistic regression analysis to examine how the characteristics of child and family predict transracial adoption for foster care adoption, private domestic adoption, international adoption, and all three types combined. The dependent variable is whether adopted child's race is different from adoptive parents' race, where the outcome categories are transracial adoption (coded as 1) and race of adopted child and that of adoptive parents are the same (coded as 0). The independent variables include type of adoption and characteristics of the child and family. Child characteristics are sex, age at adoption, and special health care needs. Family characteristics are household income-to-poverty ratio, presence of biological child, presence of other adopted child, marital status of parents at adoption, and race of parents. The race of adoptive parents is categorized into white and non-white since we anticipate a small number of cases for some non-white race categories.

Since procedures to adopt children through foster care are unique compared to the other types of adoption, we limit our sample to children of private domestic adoption and international adoption to examine factors associated with the different adoption decisions. The exclusion of adoption through foster care is because such adoption is often preceded by living together prior to a decision to adopt, unlike other types of adoption. We further restrict our sample to children who were not related to the adoptive parents since the factors that parents consider at the time of adoption would differ for the adoption of a related child and the adoption of a non-related child. We will use logistic regression analysis to examine 466 children of private domestic adoption and 539 children of international adoption. The dependent variable is the type of adoption, where the outcome categories are international adoption (coded as 1) and private domestic adoption (coded as 0). The independent variables include reasons that parents placed an importance when they adopted children domestically or internationally and characteristics of family. Family

characteristics are household income-to poverty ratio, presence of biological child, presence of other adopted child, marital status of parents at adoption, and race of parents. Again, the race of adoptive parents is categorized into white and non-white since we anticipate a small number of cases for some non-white race categories. There are four variables for reasons that were important for adoptive parents – speed, preference for adopting an infant, race/ethnicity of a child, and preference for a closed adoption. Because NSAP used a multistage probability sample design, Stata survey (svy) command (Taylor series linearization method) will be used to correct the standard errors for all analyses.

Since the race of parents is not included in the publicly available version of the NSAP data, we have applied for the restricted version of the NSAP data. Our proposal has recently been accepted, thus we will be finalizing the data analysis this November. Based on the preliminary analysis using the publicly available data, we found that when parents adopt children from abroad, the adoption is more likely to be a transracial adoption compared to foster care adoption or private domestic adoption. While there were more transracial adoptions among foster care adoptions compared to those among private domestic adoptions, we did not find a statistical difference between two types.

In the comparison of domestic private adoption and international adoption, we found that adoptive parents who place an importance on having a child who is the same race/ethnicity as their family are more likely to adopt domestically compared to adopting internationally. Also adoptive parents who have domestically adopted children are more likely to say that having an infant is an important reason. On the other hand, those parents who adopted children internationally expressed closed adoption (i.e., no information exchange or contact with child's birth family) and getting a child sooner to be important reasons.

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