Adopting Across Race: Strategies for Anti-Racist, Ethical Transracial Adoptions

Lucy Grace Selby

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Committee:

Christian Matheis, Chair

Visiting Assistant Professor for Justice and Policy Studies

María Amado

Lincoln Financial Professor of Sociology and Anthropology

Sherry Giles

Jefferson-Pilot Professor of Justice and Policy Studies

Sonalini Sapra

Associate Dean for Undergraduate Studies, School for International Training

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my brother, Wetu. You inspire me daily in everything you do,

and you inspired my interest a year ago in choosing this thesis topic.

Happy 8 years home, today, April 22, 2024.

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Abstract

In this study, the shortcomings of current adoption processes and policies surrounding transracial adoptions of African American children by white families are addressed through a meta-analysis, evidence-based skepsis research project. The shortcomings can be attributed to the fact that many, if not most, adoption agencies follow colorblind practices that do not have specific protections and guidelines in place for transracial adoptions. The colorblind perspective taken on by many adoption agencies disregards the presence and influence of systemic racism and the negative effect it can have on African American children who are adopted transracially. In response to this, and to move away from the colorblind norm, this study proposes Anti-Racist Transracial Adoption Practices (ARTAPs). These practices are justified by grounding the research first in a meta-analysis of recent literature and empirical data on transracial adoption, and second in Normative Ethical Theory and Critical Race Theory, which ground the study in an understanding of race dynamics and systemic racism. The study's purpose is to propose ARTAPs in order to guide policymakers in shifting adoption and social work agency's practices and policies regarding transracial adoption to being more anti-racist. Structurally, the paper includes Chapter 1: the Introduction, Chapter 2: the Literature Review, Chapter 3: the Theory, Chapter 4: the Methods, Chapter 5: the Intervention Strategies, or ARTAPs, and Chapter 6: the Conclusion and Discussion of limitations and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Federal Child Welfare policy has three primary goals. They want to ensure the safety of, enable permanency for children, and promote the "well-being of children and their families" (*The Failures and Future of the U.S. Foster Care System,* n.d.). The United States's foster care and adoption systems have these goals at the forefront of their operations. Why then, are there not more specific guidelines and policies in place that reference race and protect, specifically, children of color, who are already overrepresented in the system? It seems that many, if not most, adoption agencies operate from a colorblind perspective. That is—not acknowledging race, a perspective sometimes taken in the hopes of saying racism is not a problem, but in reality, this colorblind perspective disregards race and racism as still being a defining factor in the quality of life of everyone in the United States (Bonilla-Silva, 2009). People operating under ideologies of colorblind racism harm people of color by refusing to acknowledge and by minimizing the effects and presence of systemic racism, which in turn reinforces the same destructive, racist system (Bonilla-Silva, 2009, p. 29). Systemic racism affects people of color's job opportunities, pay, housing options, access to and quality of education and healthcare, and much more; by denying the existence of this harmful system, white people reinforce it and keep it in place. Colorblind racism denies racism as still being present in our country—and to avoid mentioning race in adoption policies is to ignore how a child and adoptive family's difference in race may affect the child's well-being. In response to the issue of colorblind practices, through a constructive meta-analysis, Evidence-Based Skepsis policy advocacy research paper, I present Anti-Racist Transracial Adoption Practices (ARTAPs) to help inform social work and adoption agency practices and policies.

To outline and arrive at the ARTAPs I present, I use an Evidence-Based Skepsis (EBS) method of research to support my recommendations, outlined by Matheis (2024). EBS involves "explanatory work to detail relationships among particular variables, facts, and concepts," where the issue being addressed is presented, and theories and contextual concepts are used to frame the problem at hand (Matheis, 2024, p. 6). This is where I present my meta-analysis of recent research on transracial adoptions. Next, the "typical actors and conditions" relevant to the proposed policy or change in policy are introduced to provide further context (Matheis, 2024, p. 6). Here, I establish the main actors to be adoptees, adoption agencies and social workers, and white adoptive parents. Lastly, based on the information found and presented, "conceptual resources to guide administrative action" are proposed, which is where I present my ARTAPs (Matheis, 2024, p. 6).

Every one in thirty-five people in the United States is adopted, and over one hundred thousand children are adopted every year (*Adoption Statistics: Adopt a Baby*, n.d.). Adoption is an opportunity for families who want to give a child a home a home, an opportunity for people who cannot biologically have children to have children, an opportunity for children in foster care or private agencies to have a healthy, loving family. As beautiful as adoption can be, there are also possible harms and risks of trauma to adoption, specifically, to transracial adoption. Transracial adoptions are adoptions where the adoptive parent(s)/family is adopting a child of a different race than them. Of all U.S. domestic adoptions, 28% were transracial between the years 2017 and 2019 (Kalisher et al., 2020). In an inherently racialized and white supremacist society such as the U.S., it is impossible to ignore race as a factor in transracial adoptions and, therefore, the impacts of race and racism must be considered (Bell, 1993, p. 573). To have the child's best interest in mind means that race must be *more* than acknowledged. This study's purpose is to

promote the dignity and protect the vulnerability of transracial adoptees by providing adoption process interventions and recommendations that shift these processes from colorblind to anti-racist.

The structure of the following paper starts with the literature review, where I review recent literature and the data these studies have collected. Next, I introduce the theoretical framework and perspectives that guide ARTAPs, the recommendations. I then detail the methods used in this study and explain the study's framework. Subsequently, I present my recommended strategies and policy changes/additions, ARTAPs, drawing from the literature review and theory sections. Finally, I discuss limitations and future research opportunities and guidance.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

There are many studies and debates about all forms of adoption and its effects on adoptees, and, more specifically, much debate about transracial adoption and its effects on children of color. In this chapter, I review recent research focused on the effects of transracial adoptions on African American children who are adopted into predominantly white families and homes. To better understand the experiences of transracial adoptees, I present information from recent journal articles and their study results, as well as stories from transracial adoptees, which are represented within the study's findings. To start, I review indicators of what it means when something is done in an anti-racist fashion and done *well* in transracial adoptions, or *Indicators of Anti-Racism (IA-Rs)*. For instance, did the adoptive parent teach their child about racism in a way that combats white supremacy and frames the dignity of people of color? Do they live in a culturally and racially diverse area? In the following section, I consider indicators of when something in a transracial adoption is done *poorly* or *Indicators of Colorblindness or Racism (ICRs)*. When is something done in a colorblind way of thinking? Does the adoptive parent promote white supremacist values? Does the parent know how to talk about race and understand racism? The studies I look at do not use the terminology of IA-Rs and ICRs that I am using here but talk about things done well and things done poorly throughout the adoption process. I am naming them differently, and applying more pointed language that highlights the need for specific anti-racist language needing to be brought to the forefront of transracial adoption practices. In the third section of the literature review, I focus on the key recommendations advocated for by researchers. What kind of changes in transracial adoption policies are needed to promote the dignity of adoptees and recognize race as a critical factor? How can guidelines be set so that transracial adoptees are more likely to develop a positive racial identity? Lastly, I

explain how my project adds to a gap in existing research and what my study adds to the discussion.

2.1 Indicators of Anti-Racism (IA-Rs)

In Hadley's study titled "Transracial Adoptions in America: An Analysis of the Role of Racial Identity Among Black Adoptees and the Benefits of Reconceptualizing Success Within Adoptions" (2020), she argues that there is a detrimental impact on Black adoptees' racial identity when transracially adopted. Hadley redefines what a "successful" transracial adoption is (Hadley, 2020, p. 712). Often, a transracial adoption may be categorized as successful if the adoptive parent and child have a good relationship, or if the child has high self-esteem (Hadley, 2020). While these are important factors and meaningful pieces of a child's wellbeing, they do not directly refer to the racial aspect of a child's identity. An indicator of actual "success," says Hadley, is if the child has a sense of self-awareness as a person of color—meaning they understand what it means to be a person of color living in the U.S., a highly racialized society (2020, p. 690). Adding to this, another IA-R is the child having a positive cultural identity, which refers to the child identifying and connecting with the culture of their birth parents and thinking of it in a positive way (Hadley, 2020, p. 690). Other IA-Rs include living in a diverse environment and school, adoptive parents connecting children with African American role models, and the child having an understanding of the negative implications of being African American in America (Hadley, 2020).

In Hamilton, Samek, Keyes, McGue, & Iacono's 2015 study "Identity Development in a Transracial Environment: Racial/Ethnic Minority Adoptees in Minnesota" the authors led a study in Minnesota with a sample group of 481 adoptees of color split into four groups by their race, and one group of 126 same-race white adoptees. Their purpose was to determine whether

transracially adopted children have increased risk or problems with self-esteem and ethnic identity development (Hamilton et al., 2015). In this study, they determined that one IA-R for transracially adopted children is the adoptee having few identity problems (Hamilton et al., 2015). This means, in general, that they know who they are, have a sense of self, and an understanding of their personal and group identities. Being "comfortable" with their racial identity is also an IA-R, as the adoptee understands their racial identity and everything that comes with it (Hamilton et al., 2015). This could look like the child readily understanding cultural references and icons when interacting with other African American people or knowing and understanding common experiences of African American people living in the U.S. The adoptee should also have an understanding of and knowledge about their cultural background and history, or at least have the opportunity to learn about this if they so choose (Hamilton et al., 2015). Their white parents should be encouraging and find opportunities for their child to be a part of their birth culture (Hamilton et al., 2015). There should be open communication about race between the parents and child (Hamilton et al., 2015). A high level of comfortability should be present when talking about racial issues (Hamilton et al., 2015). Importantly, the child should feel comfortable going to their parents to talk about any sort of racism they are experiencing and know that they will be met with support and help (Hamilton et al., 2015). The authors also include the adoptee having high self-esteem as an indicator of things done well, however, it should be noted that this is critiqued by Hadley and others (Hamilton et al., 2015).

In Juarez and Smith's 2015 study "Race Lessons in Black and White: How White Adoptive Parents Socialize Black Adoptees in Predominantly White Communities" they aim to uncover how ways of teaching about race and racism "position family members to either challenge or perpetuate historical, racial inequities and mistreatment faced by African Americans

and other communities of color within US society" (Juarez & Smith, 2015, p. 108). Through the theoretical construct of white racial framing, the authors analyze key themes of these parents' "race lessons" drawn from interviews with transracially adopted adults and white parents who adopted transracially (Juarez & Smith, 2015, p. 108). An IA-R, Juarez and Smith say, is if white parents have cultural understandings of race *before* transracially adopting (Juarez & Smith, 2015). If the parents have this previous education and understanding, that prepares them more than others to "infuse [...] positive racial knowledge" into raising their children (Juarez & Smith, 2015, p. 116). Another IA-R is when the adoptee is exposed to communities of color frequently and has opportunities to spend substantial time periods with communities who share the adoptee's racial identities (Juarez & Smith, 2015, p. 129). Lastly, another IA-R is a parent who will hold themselves and fellow white people accountable for their racism and role in white supremacy (Juarez & Smith, 2015).

In Commer's study "When 'Good Intentions' Backfire: A Case for Non-Transracial Legal Guardianship Rather Than Adoption and Why Transracial Adoption Is Not Trauma Informed" (2023), she aims to research the consequences and impacts of transracial adoption on adoptees. Commer's findings suggest that transracial adoptions, "have caused and continue to cause adoptees significant trauma and distress despite healing efforts" (2023, p. 1). Because of these findings, Commer does not offer any IA-Rs of transracial adoptions; all transracial adoptions are viewed as traumatizing and not in the best interest of the child (2023). She surveys 42 transracial adoptees who have the same, traumatizing experience and her findings and conclusions echo this message (Commer, 2023, p. 7). She roots her argument in the history of transracial adoption in the U.S., too, noting its connection to a "complicated history of oppression" and it having strong ties to slavery and the forced removal of many Indigenous

children from their families and homes (Commer, 2023, p. 2).

In Samuels' study "'Being Raised by White People:' Navigating Racial Difference Among Adopted Multiracial Adults" (2009) she explores the experience of 25 transracially adopted people through three major themes: 1) "the centrality yet absence of racial resemblance," 2) the navigation of different racial experiences between parent and child, and 3) the management of "societal perceptions of transracial adoption" (p. 80). One IA-R that authors note is when parents try to help their children navigate feelings of racial difference and acknowledge these feelings that may be within or external to the white family system (Samuels, 2009). If white adoptive parents can take on the task of racial socialization—offering strategies for dealing with racial discrimination and stigma—that is good, but it is hard to do as white people who have not experienced the racism and stigma about which they are trying to teach their child about (Samuels, 2009, p. 83). Adoptees also highlighted the importance of being able to interact daily with people and places where they could at least partly "blend in" racially (Samuels, 2009, p. 87).

2.2 Indicators of Colorblindness or Racism (ICRs)

In Hadley's study, she argues that a child having positive self-esteem does not mean that the transracial adoption is "successful" (2020, p. 712). Further, the child being able to simply name themselves as a Black person does not mean that they have a positive racial identity or understanding of race and racism (Hadley, 2020). Sixty percent of the Black transracially adopted children in Hadley's study did not feel that they had anything in common with other Black people, and did not have any interest in associating with them (2020, p. 695). If the child is being brought up in a predominantly white environment this is another ICR, says Hadley, and leads to a higher likelihood of the child not wanting to associate with other Black people (2020,

p. 695). Hadley also makes note of the common error of white parents conflating "urban culture" as "Black culture," which is a misconstrual of what Black culture is (2020, p. 696). This promotes confusion and teaches transracially adopted children harmful stereotypes.

In Hamilton et al.'s study (2015), the ICRs came directly from transracial adoptee's experiences. One ICR is a lack of communication about race between the parent and child (Hamilton et al., 2015). The parents being unprepared or unable to talk about race and racial issues is indicative of them not being fully aware of the importance of these types of conversations when raising a child of color. Having an undeveloped racial or ethnic identity, meaning the child does not have a sense of belonging and connection to their racial or ethnic group, is another ICR—as other studies have also noted (Hamilton et al., 2015). If the child is offered little involvement in cultural socialization practices (cultural traditions, learning history, and values/beliefs) this is a failure on the part of the adoptive parents (Hamilton et al., 2015). Study participants noted experiences with their adoptive parents feeling like they "exercised power and control or ownership over them" (Hamilton et al., 2015). This is a possible indicator of a hierarchical parent-child relationship that may be taking advantage of racist, white supremacist cultural norms to instill damaging, unfair relationships between parent and child.

In Juarez and Smith's study (2015), they interview 10 white adoptive parents who have an understanding of culture and of Black culture but do not know how to or try hard enough to find opportunities for their Black child to experience their culture. Juarez and Smith describe the parents as being cultural "tourists," and only allowing their transracially adopted children to be tourists of their culture (2015, p. 121). This is an ICR. "Drive-bys of Blackness" and cultural tourism are not enough for the cultural socialization process of the adoptee or for the development of a healthy racial identity (Juarez & Smith, 2015, p. 121). Parents expecting their

children to "pick up and understand African American culture" without actually being a part of it is an unfair, uninformed, and unrealistic perspective (Juarez & Smith, 2015, p. 121). The researchers uncover stories from their interviews with 13 adoptees that detail experiences they had wherein they were directed by their parents to step up and handle issues of racism that they face in a calm and "caring" way—encouraging the belief that the white offender may just be "uneducated" and that it is the child's responsibility to educate them (Juarez & Smith, 2015, p. 122). When adoptive parents focus on the needs of white offenders and not making them uncomfortable over the needs and protection of their child that is an indicator of them taking the side of the oppressor. Additionally, parents framing racist incidents as "misunderstandings" is negative as they are giving the perpetrator the benefit of the doubt and silencing the child's experience of racism and oppression (Juarez & Smith, 2015, p. 122). Adoptive parents fail again when they try to dismiss their child's anger or desire for conflict with a white person who has committed some form of racist act—calling their child's anger "unwarranted" and encouraging them instead to be kind and silence their justified anger (Juarez & Smith, 2015, p. 124).

In Commer's 2023 study, she concludes that transracial adoption, under any circumstance, is traumatizing and bad for the child, and that any positives do not outweigh the negatives (Commer, 2023). Supported by survey data, she argues that transracial adoption is rooted in white supremacy, the white savior industrial complex, and colonialism (Commer, 2023). Transracial adoption is a barrier to "racial mirroring," as well as a hindrance on identity formation and development, she says (Commer, 2023, p. 5). There are mental health concerns and "maladaptive behaviors"—preventing adoptees from living fully integrated, fulfilling lives—associated with transracial adoptees, which constitutes reason for transracial adoptions to not continue, in her opinion. Another reason for it to not be in the child's best interest, Commer

argues, are the incomplete medical histories and lack of knowledge of the adoptee's "cultural and familial ties" (2023, p. 6). Transracial adoption often forces adoptees to assimilate to the identities and cultures of their oppressors, and the adoptee is never given any choice in this matter, much less the adoption as a whole (Commer, 2023, p. 11). It contributes to an "adverse childhood experience" that Commer argues against (2023, p. 13).

In Samuels' article, she notes that Black children adopted by white families who are raised in predominantly white communities and "cultural contexts" report discomfort with their racial appearance as well as in interactions with other Black people (2009, p. 82). Their sense of competence or sense of belonging in predominantly "African American contexts" may be diminished, at least partly, because of choices their parents made in their racial socialization (Samuels, 2009, p. 82). If parents are not able to offer their child a "racial reference group" then that is an ICR (Samuels, 2009, p. 86). The act of parents teaching their children to dismiss racism as regular "childhood name-calling" is another ICR (Samuels, 2009, p. 87). If parents choose a "colorblind" approach, that leaves the child to navigate a world of racialization and racism all on their own without the support of their parents or other role models (Samuels, 2009, p. 88).

2.3 What is Needed or Advocated For in the Research

Hadley concludes her study with five policy recommendations for helping to mitigate the harms children may face when they are adopted transracially (Hadley, 2020). First, she advocates for adoption and social work agencies to take race into consideration when placing children with families (at present, this is only allowed in eleven states) (Hadley, 2020, p. 699). Second, Hadley calls for a mandatory education program for white parents adopting children of color on culture and race (Hadley, 2020, p. 702). Parents must then use their knowledge from this program to inform their parenting and teach their children about race (Hadley, 2020, p. 702). Next, Hadley

argues that adoption and social work agencies should take into consideration the biological parent's wishes for their child to be adopted by a family of color (Hadley, 2020, p. 704). This is an act of protection by the biological parents for their child—wishing that their child can be taken care of by a family who will fully understand and embrace the child's race. Additionally, Hadley recommends that adoptees be able to "exert agency in choosing the race of their prospective adoptive parents" when the child is old enough to comprehend and understand these topics (Hadley, 2020, p. 706). Lastly, as a longer-term solution, social work and adoption agencies should encourage more African American families to adopt and foster children (Hadley, 2020, p. 709).

In Hamilton et al.'s study, the researchers advocate for there to be more communication between birth parents, adoptive parents, and their adopted children of color about race and their child's culture (Hamilton et al., 2015). They also push for more research to be done on "communication patterns and perceptions of parent and child within the transracial home environment" (Hamilton et al., 2015). They advocate for white adoptive parents to not be avoidant of race or to take on a colorblind perspective and to instead try to offer their transracially adopted children racial socialization—the space to learn about race and their own racial identity and how it affects their place/perceived place in society (Hamilton et al., 2015).

In Juarez and Smith's 2015 study, they advocate for transracially adopted children to be taught the real history of racism in America and the reality of the grip it still has on our country and world. Celebrating diversity and educating Black children about famous Black people is not enough—they need to be educated on why they have been put at a disadvantage in U.S. society because of their skin color (Juarez & Smith, 2015). The authors repeat the resounding message that white people created white supremacy and that means that white people must work to

dismantle it—including, importantly, white parents adopting Black children (Juarez & Smith, 2015). In order to do this, and if a white family wants to adopt a child of color, they themselves must understand the racial history of the U.S. and their privilege that they have because of it (Juarez & Smith, 2015). Juarez and Smith argue that if white adoptive parents can learn to teach "race lessons" in ways that challenge white supremacy as opposed to recreate it, and can do this "through and within the traditions of the African American historical experience" it could be possible for an anti-racist transracial adoption to be realized (Juarez & Smith, 2015, p. 127).

In Commer's 2023 study, she concludes with four policy recommendations. First, Commer recommends that all transracial adoptions, within the U.S. and internationally, are discontinued (2023, p. 15). A second recommendation recognizes that many transracial adoptees need mental health support. To that end, she recommends a policy for "wraparound services that can connect transracial adoptees with trauma-informed therapists" as well as mentors and safe spaces—all of which should be at no cost to the adoptee (Commer, 2023, p. 15). Next, Commer recommends that parents who have already adopted a child transracially undergo "ongoing psychological evaluations" (2023, p. 16). She advocates for ongoing training on biases, cultural humility, and microaggressions, as well as family therapy with a trauma-informed therapist for adoptive parents (Commer, 2023). Finally, Commer recommends future policies to allow adoptees to access their original birth certificates and health records (2023, p. 16). Additionally, though not included in the formal recommendations, Commer argues that adopters must be educated on race and the "impact of racial isolation" (2023, p. 11). Families adopting transracially should also have to prove they have the resources available to support their child's healthy racial identity development (Commer, 2023). Social workers must use a trauma-informed approach and connect adoptees with appropriate, African American therapists (Commer, 2023).

Importantly, Commer notes that it is the "collective responsibility" of social workers, child advocacy groups, and other government and societal welfare services to protect transracial adoptees (2023, p. 16).

Samuels (2009) recommends that parents consistently reference and teach about the knowledge of the African American and Black community in order to help with racial socialization (p. 91). She urges white adoptive parents to have a mindset that embraces learning about and understanding race and racism; this means acknowledging their child's race and the specific experiences they have in life because of this part of their identity (Samuels, 2009). Samuels recommends instead of colorblindness, "color-conscious" parenting, where parents should seek out racial and ethnic communities that their children can be a part of to foster a positive view of their racialized selves and foster a sense of belonging (2009, p. 92).

There are many differing opinions when it comes to transracial adoptions—many people support them and many people do not. To understand the experience of transracial adoptees and the harms they may face, we must listen to them, as they are the ones most vulnerable to racism within the system. It is not a secret that many social workers and adoption agency professionals know about the problems that come along with transracial adoptions. Without adequate preparatory training and support, most people are not likely aware of the negative effects race can have on transracial adoptees. Many social workers support and push for anti-racist changes to be made, as evidenced by numerous research articles, but change at broad, systemic levels can be hard to make happen. While some social workers and agencies may operate on anti-racist policies, and there may be those who incorporate some of the interventions that are being recommended in this study into their agencies practices, however, it is not widespread enough. One adoption agency, Pact, based in California, but works with families in all states, is an agency

specifically working with adoptees of color and parents of color (*Pact: An Adoption Alliance,*

n.d.). Pact operates on anti-racist policies and centers the needs of adoptees of color; to do this,

they only seek out and provide support to adoptive parents of color (*Pact: An Adoption Alliance,*

n.d.).

The more advocacy and recommendations that are made, the closer anti-racist transracial

adoptions are to coming to fruition, and the more organizations like Pact will be created. With

this meta-analysis, evidence-based skepsis study, I hope to offer more reasons for anti-racist

practices to be considered by agencies. In the next section, Chapter 3, I go into detail about the

theoretical perspectives I am using as evidence for my ARTAPs and how theory contextualizes

the need for new, anti-racist practices.

Chapter 3: Theory

Framing this study within the wide-ranging context of United States culture and society is necessary to be able to understand and address the harms that transracial adoptees may face. The United States was built on the colonization and genocide of Indigenous peoples, enslavement of African Americans, and consequentially, on principles rooted in white supremacy (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). To fully understand the harm that can come to African American children adopted by white families, there must be an understanding of the binding racism present in U.S. society and all of its institutions.

Theories offer perspectives and ideas on ways to find patterns and connections between facts and "social phenomenon" (Bell, 2013). In this chapter, I apply Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Normative Ethical Theory (NET) to support both critical and prescriptive inquiry. Critically, CRT and NET help to highlight the flaws in our society's institutions that have led the institutions of adoption, social work, and family systems to perpetuate the harms of white supremacy. Prescriptively, CRT and NET help to outline interventions that can be made by social work and adoption agencies to instate added protections for transracial adoptees. CRT and NET can guide these institutions to better understand the impact race and racism have on transracial adoptees, and the right evaluative steps to take to establish new norms.

3.1 Normative Ethical Theory

Normative ethical theory (NET) is a branch of broader fields of moral and ethical theory that focuses on discovering what is right, what is wrong, and what is "better or worse" (MacKinnon, 1998, p. 5). NET scholars study human behavior to determine and answer questions about the morally right way to act in a given situation and to discern the values and

principles used to choose between competing demands. NET is evaluative in nature. It aims to establish "norms" or "reasons" for what is right and how to uphold these norms while attempting to "give a justification" for these norms (MacKinnon, 1998, p. 8).

Aristotle argued that the aim of all human beings should be to "exemplify human excellence of character" (Gregor et al, 2022). Other theorists and scholars of NET offer us a system of understanding morality and what our norms should be to exemplify excellent character (Gregor et al, 2022). These principles of NET in combination with CRT are used in this study to recommend new norms for how to facilitate transracial adoptions that promote dignity and protect the vulnerability of adoptees. There must be a shift away from the current colorblind norms that determine the course of transracial adoptions and instead address race and racism within the system from an anti-racist perspective.

3.1.1 Hallie's Theory of Institutionalized Cruelty

For this study, NET identifies what is better or worse in the context of transracial adoption, and offers guidance for establishing new norms and protections for adoptees. From among several possible sources within NET, I apply Philip Hallie's ideas of positive and negative ethics, institutionalized cruelty, dignity, and hospitality to present recommendations for a new, systematic way of facilitating transracial adoptions. To understand the harms that may come with transracial adoption, one must understand and be educated on racism and the racial context of the U.S. For white people, among other things, this involves taking a step back, examining our privilege, and unlearning many racist falsehoods that we have been taught to believe and abide by. To help identify the racism that affects transracial adoptees, I apply Hallie's four main criteria for what makes an institution cruel, or what constitutes "institutionalized cruelty."

3.1.1.1 Institutionalized Cruelty is Substantial

Hallie's first criterion for assessing institutionalized cruelty is that it is *substantial.* By this, he means that substantial cruelty operates in ways that result in the "maiming of a person's dignity" and the crushing of individual and/or group self-respect (1981, p. 23). The most substantial harm that can be done is when perpetrators of hatred, violence, and racism convince the victims of this violence to believe that this treatment is what they are deserving of. The victim begins to lose their self-respect as those in power continue to think of them and treat them in derogatory ways. When transracial adoptees experience white members of society committing racist acts against them, it is easy for the adoptees to end up believing less of themselves and internalizing the idea that they deserve to be treated with less dignity than white children, a process and oppressive tactic called *internalized oppression* (Pharr, 1997, p. 60). A harm occurs again when adoptees experience their adoptive family treat them differently from how they see white children treated, or when their family members have beliefs that support white supremacy. The white adoptive parents may be unaware, too, that they risk instilling racist beliefs, ideologies, and messages into the minds of their adopted children while fostering an environment that disregards the dignity that African American children deserve. This maiming of dignity is substantial because it turns into internalized racism in the minds of children, who then may grow up supporting and being a part of the white supremacy that harmed them in the first place (Pharr, 1997, p. 60).

3.1.1.2 Institutionalized Cruelty is Pervasive

Second, when institutionalized, the cruelty is *pervasive*; it is everywhere in the society—in nearly every social institution and impossible to avoid—it is "woven into" the

common norms of society (Hallie, 1981; Matheis, 2023). Racism and white supremacy are institutionalized—which means they are ever-present, and African American children are affected by it in nearly all social situations with rare exceptions—and to an increased degree when their families are white. In a country where whiteness is considered the default and norm, home life and being with family are opportunities for African American children to escape at least some of the constant barrage of whiteness. For African American children adopted into white families, this is not possible and furthers the normalization of whiteness. This can be confusing, uncomfortable, and negatively affect the child's understanding of their own racial identity and race in general. The presence of white people and absence of people of color in a transracial adoptee's childhood is common, which allows for the pervasiveness of racism to often go unchecked—with white parents unaware, and adoptees learning and taking in the constant patterns and repetitions of white supremacy that they see in their everyday lives. Given the position white people have in the power hierarchies of our country, they often live in a place of privilege leaving them unable and/or unwilling to fully comprehend the reality of racism in the U.S. White adoptive parents who fall into this category pose a threat to their adopted child's understanding and experience of racism.

3.1.1.3 Institutionalized Cruelty is Subtle

Third, when substantial and pervasive, the cruelty is also *subtle*: it is so normalized and pervasive that one might forget that cruelty is present (Hallie, 1981). It is difficult to notice without deliberate effort, with both the oppressors and the oppressed finding themselves "obscuring the harm" that is being persistently inflicted (Hallie, 1981, p. 24). Institutionalized racism in the U.S. has conditioned white people into mindsets of serving white supremacy—and they might often be unaware of this. Unless a white person is continuously unlearning and

striving to be *anti*-racist, they will not be able to safely and properly be a parent to a child of color. White people, even when working to be anti-racist, likely perpetrate microaggressions and take part in harmful ways of thinking. Even if it is not intentional, that does not mean it's not harmful or oppressive. The act of a white parent of an African American adoptee centering the experience of white people over people of color after a racial injustice has occurred is an example of this. If a child experiences a racist act or microaggression at school, and their parents center the conversation around giving the perpetrator the benefit of the doubt, or that it is an opportunity for the child to learn, or assert that it is the child's job to forgive the perpetrator of the racist act, or to take on the role of being a teacher to the perpetrator, the parent is committing a racist act, too. The white parent may think they are helping to promote a learning environment for the perpetrator, but in reality, they are subtly (or not so subtly) telling their child that the feelings of white children are more important than their feelings. For parents to disregard the racism that their child may be experiencing or to continue to perpetrate racist acts in their home, they are telling the already vulnerable child that their safety comes second to white comfort. It is in this way, and others, that racism and white supremacy are continuously normalized and the harm is obscured—in all spaces throughout society.

3.1.1.4 Institutionalized Cruelty Relies on a Power Differential

Fourth and finally, there is a *power differential*; there is a group-level hierarchy, and a class of ruling elite who determine the norms and have control over the society (Hallie, 1981; Matheis, 2023). The systems and institutions are designed to benefit the ruling elite at the expense of others. Power differentials are present in many situations in regular, everyday life. White people are taught that they hold power and say over people of color in our society. Without education, it may be hard for an average white person to be aware of this power

differential and how it could take shape in a parent-child relationship. In a 2015 study by Hamilton, Samek, Keyes, McGue, and Iacono, (Hamilton, et al), they surveyed transracial adoptees of color on their experiences of being transracially adopted. While adoptees brought up a multitude of issues, one was the feeling that their adopters "exercised power and control or ownership over them" (Hamilton et al, 2015, p. 10). White parents must be conscious of building strong, healthy, trusting relationships with their child that do not trigger transgenerational trauma and reminders of oppressive, hierarchical systems. This is a risky dynamic and if not navigated carefully or in an anti-racist fashion, will cause harm and trauma.

3.1.2 Hospitality

To oppose institutionalized cruelty—and to articulate the opposite of it—Hallie outlines a theory of "hospitality" (1981, p. 26). The opposite of cruelty cannot just be the absence and removal of the cruelty, there has to be a real antithesis to that cruelty—which Hallie says is hospitality: "unsentimental, efficacious love" (1981, p. 26). Hospitality in this sense involves active, effortful work to restore and bolster the dignity of those who have been targets of institutionalized cruelty—healing the harms done and restoring dignity. Applying this to transracial adoption norms and policies, racism and white supremacy are the institutionalized cruelty, and the opposite of this is not simply removing racism from the equation, that is not possible. The opposite following Hallie's model of hospitality is *anti*-racism and equity that is anti-oppressive; there must be actions and changes that make up for and remedy the racism and white supremacy that has plagued our systems since they were built.

3.1.3 White Supremacy as Institutionalized Cruelty

Hallie's definition of institutionalized cruelty can be used to understand the

institutionalization of white supremacist racism in the U.S. The systems of racism in every institution in our country cannot be easily fixed and must be combatted comprehensively. With the understanding that white supremacy is institutionalized in the U.S., we can use Hallie's ideas, NET, and CRT to analyze the problems and risks within the system and provide recommendations for it moving forward. While this racism holds up, transracial adoptions of African American children by white families will continue to need to be closely monitored in systematic ways. A system that holds families accountable to anti-racism and protects transracial adoptees must be established and reinforced.

I apply Hallie's ideas of morality, cruelty, and dignity to offer a morally-based perspective on transracial adoptions. Changes need to be made and policies restructured to make way for more ethically-focused, anti-racist transracial adoptions. Within the circles of adoption and specifically transracial adoption, the normative approach does not often have the factor of race in mind. It takes work, time, funding, and dedication to educate white parents on race and racism when adopting transracially. In a system where social workers are already stretched thin and have overloaded cases, it's easier to follow a normative approach—one that does not focus much on how race is going to affect the child and family. However, we must shift away from this approach through carefully implemented changes at various levels if we are to truly have the best interests of children at heart.

3.2 Critical Race Theory

The movement that we now know as Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged in the mid-1970s and became more fully evolved by the end of the 1980s (Delgado & Stefancic, 2006, p. 2). It was developed and founded first in the legal field by key figures such as Derrick Bell,

Alan Freeman, Richard Delgado, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Angela Harris, Charles Lawrence, Mari

Matsuda, and Patricia Williams, and it has since spread across many other disciplines including

education, politics, ethics, and others (Delgado & Stefancic, 2006, p. 2). These leaders developed

critical race theory in response to a slowing of movement organizing and structural changes (e.g.

laws and policies) surrounding racial justice in the United States after the racial Civil Rights

movements, and a need for more comprehensive interventions against everyday racism. Delgado

and Stefanic describe the goal of Critical Race Theory as the transformation of "the relationship

among race, racism, and power" and to give more context to the broader societal perspective of

racism and the ways it functions and affects our country's economics, history, group, and

self-interest, and emotions and "the unconscious" (2006, p. 1).

There is some debate over the many tenets of critical race theory—with so many different

ideas and leaders informing the body of scholarship. However, several widely understood key

tenets are core to CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2006, p. 3). To dive more deeply into aspects of

CRT and to highlight the risks in transracial adoption, this study focuses on three tenets: 1) the

intercentricity of racism, 2) interest convergence, and 3) storytelling and developing

counter-narratives to dominant ideologies.

3.2.1 Racism as Intercentric

First, by understanding racism as permanent and racism as *intercentric* to society, we

acknowledge that nearly all political, economic, and cultural systems and processes are designed

by, for, and about white people, to the advantage of whites as a class, and to the detriment of

other social groups. Given that, we can understand that transracial adoptions can either be racist

or anti-racist, and there are no such things as non-racist transracial adoptions. Racism as

intercentric means that racism is central to U.S. institutions and society, and is essential to the functioning of these systems (Bell, 1993, p. 573). We can understand how white people who are uneducated on race and racism and are raising an African American child may cause problems and further racist traumas, because of this intercentricity. Such white parents will not be able to teach their child about race, give them opportunities for racial and cultural socialization, and provide opportunities for racial mirroring in the way African American parents could. Because of the intercentricity of racism in our society, white people are used to operating on ideals that support white supremacy. There are no transracial adoptions that can be successfully colorblind or ignorant of race when adopting in the context of our white supremacist society and culture. White families must be actively following steps to support their African American child and combat the issues that can come with transracial adoptions, as well as educating themselves on race and racism. It will take effort and unlearning for a white family to be able to filter out racist and white supremacist-serving values from their home and language. Even so, there will remain aspects of racism that families cannot filter out. Being aware of this, however, will make them more likely to prioritize the first-hand experiences of transracial adoptees when they name experiences as racist.

3.2.2 Interest Convergence

Second is the tenet of *interest convergence*—meaning that the interests of people of color will only be met when they coincide with the interests of white people, and that no progress will ever be made that is solely for the benefit of people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2006, p. 3). Further, interest convergence leads us to realize that any social change that appears to benefit people of color can only occur if the overall, long-term outcome is benefitting whites more. Following the thesis of interest convergence, protections for African American children being

adopted by white families will only ever be passed or enforced if they are also benefiting white children and white populations overall. Only when interests converge will anything specifically benefitting African American children occur. One way to think about this is to think about how even though there are disproportionately high rates of children of color entering the foster care system, no significant efforts have been made to *specifically* address the high rates of children of color in the system (Simon, 2018, p. 350). There should be preventative, structural, and individualized strategies in place to help combat this disproportionality while understanding that the reason this has happened is because of the effects of racism and white supremacy. It is an act of ignorance to ignore the racism within the foster care system and in our society that is creating this overrepresentation. Of what real benefit are laws and policies that, in theory, should benefit African America families and connect them to resources to keep families together, but ultimately benefit white children and families more—failing to address the racially disproportionate rates of children of color entering the adoption system in the first place?

The Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA), passed in 2018 by Congress, is an extensive, overarching policy to reduce the number of children going into the foster care system, and yet, it does not reference or address the disproportionate rates of children of color entering the system (Text - H.R. 1892). If we are to push back against interest convergence inherent in adoption systems in the U.S., we need social work systems, lawmakers, and social workers to recognize the colorblind attitudes that have long presided over the system and transition to perspectives, acts, and policies that specifically reference and understand race as a key influencing factor. Moving forward, we cannot rely on acts and policies based on interest convergence to meet the needs of people of color. Using colorblind language in adoption ignores realistic differences in the adoption process and experience that depend on the child and family's

race.

3.2.3 Storytelling and Counternarratives vs. Dominant Narratives

Next, the tenet of *storytelling and counternarratives* calls our attention to the ways that stories and experiences of people of color will only be meaningfully or accurately remembered or represented if people of color take on the responsibility of telling their stories themselves (Delgado & Stefancic, 2006; Matheis, 2023). Dominant narratives in society typically tell stories of and uplift ideals of the dominant societal group, which in this case is white people. The narratives serve the purpose of keeping the racial power hierarchy in place. Counternarratives offer the perspective of those not in the dominant group, those who are oppressed, marginalized, and constantly spoken over. The CRT tenet of storytelling and counternarratives emphasizes the need for and the power of a counternarrative to the white supremacist narrative (Delgado & Stefancic, 2006; Matheis, 2023). A common story in the media and adoption circles of white parents is the story of the white family who heroically saved the life of a child of color by giving them a home. This perspective and story come directly from the dominant norm: white people. To know the real stories of transracial adoptions: the perspective and story must come from the adoptee. White families adopting African American children often do not take into account their colorblind perspective of the U.S. and how that will differ greatly from the perspective and experience of the child that they are adopting. How can African American adoptees thrive if the dominant narratives in our society are always spun by, for, and about white people, the dominant oppressors? The dominant narrative around transracial adoption is one told by white people and is one rooted in white saviorism. Counternarratives are necessary to know the whole, real story. To have an accurate depiction of transracial adoption, the narrative must come from transracial adoptees, not their parents. Because the current dominant narrative is so focused on the

experience of the parents, other white people looking to adopt will see these stories of what an eye-opening experience it is, and what a beautiful thing it is to offer a child of color a home. The narrative needs to change on a social and structural level: so that white families only adopt children of color if they are adequately prepared to and do so through anti-racist transracial adoption practices (ARTAPs), with full knowledge of and ability to provide the support their child will need. The adoption and social work systems must acknowledge the stories of transracial adoptees experiencing racism and racial isolation in their homes, and make potential adoptive families aware of these problems. This dominant narrative of the heroic white savior also needs to change on a personal, familial level. This narrative is damaging to potential future transracial adoptees as well as to transracial adoptees currently. If a child's adoptive parents' thinking aligns with the common dominant narrative, the adoptee is at risk of being silenced and experiencing racism within their home and among family.

In the next chapter, Chapter 4, I go over the methods used for this study. In the following chapter, Chapter 5, I apply Hallie's normative ethical theory of hospitality as a guide for anti-racist intervention strategies that benefit transracial adoptees and, therefore, also their white parents.

Chapter 4: Methods

This research project uses a method of "evidence-based skepsis" (EBS) to create

recommendations and guidelines for future policies (Matheis, 2024). Evidence-based skepsis

policymaking draws from the ideas of pragmatism when applied to Constitutional law, Naomi

Zack and her conceptions of evidence-based public policy, requiring policies to be both

falsifiable and progressive, and from Philip Hallie's description of "skeptikoi" which involves

using conceptual, empirical, and aspirational arguments for policy writing (Matheis, 2024, p. 1).

EBS involves a three-step process. Matheis explains,

> The first step, framing, draws on theoretical, empirical, aspirational, hypothetical, and
> other resources to allow for interpretation of key relationships within which a policy
> based solution may be interpreted. [...] Per Zack's determination that policies must
> benefit those governed, the second step involves a more or less rudimentary description
> of the categories of actors involved and contexts in which policy proposals likely guide
> such actors. [...] Third, EBS itemizes core concepts and commitments to utilize when
> making and changing policies. Extending the above example of a principle of dignity in a
> general policy guide, users of EBS outline a system carefully reasoned propositions – that
> is, an array of terms, concepts, and statements which actors consult when making,
> changing, and/or implementing policies (2024, p. 6).

This method of research and policy proposal is grounded in the theory of pragmatism as

applied to public policy and law. Pragmatism understands that policies have real effects on

citizen's lives, and policy must be evaluated from the perspective of how it benefits (or does not

benefit) people and how it solves problems (Matheis, 2024, p. 2). Zack's evidence-based public

policy highlights the need for and meaning in policymaking that draws from multiple forms of

resources: like theories, ideologies, and empirical data. Zack also identifies evidence-based

public policy as needing to be *falsifiable*, meaning it must be evaluated for its effectiveness or

ineffectiveness based on evidence, and policy needs to be *progressive*, meaning the policy can be

changed and is developed on the premise of it benefitting citizens and not making them worse off (Matheis, 2024, p. 4-5). Hallie's formulation of "skeptikoi" and Matheis's theory of "skepsis" joins different goals, data, facts, predictions, and ideas together to highlight a certain conclusion, or in this case, policy, that needs to be made (2024, p. 5-6). With the combination of a pragmatic view of policy, Zack's theory of evidence-based public policy, and Hallie's ideas of skepsis that offer frameworks for how to construct policy proposals, EBS is constructed.

To ground my EBS study and critical analysis of the current norms guiding transracial adoption proceedings, I reviewed recent journal articles referencing transracial adoptions of African American children by white families, finding empirical data. I focused on research that highlights the specific struggles that transracial adoptees experience when adopted into white families. Further, I selected studies that gave voice to transracial adoptees and emphasized what they consider helpful and supportive based on their experiences throughout their adoption process and upbringing in white families. From my understanding of this literature, I synthesize what I call "indicators of anti-racism" and "indicators of colorblindness or racism" of transracial adoptions.

To support my prescriptive interventions, I synthesize key concepts from normative ethical theory (NET) and critical race theory (CRT), drawing on Zack's ideas for evidence-based public policy, where she argues for multiple forms of resources to be used to support policy recommendations, including theory (Matheis, 2024, p. 4). Within these two broader theoretical frameworks, I chose to look closer at Hallie's theories of institutionalized cruelty and hospitality within NET, and the concepts of interest convergence, intercentricity of racism, and counternarratives and storytelling within CRT. Based on the empirical data that I found and did *not* find in the transracial adoption literature I read, I formulated a list of interventions, supported

by NET and CRT, that could be given and implemented in various social work and adoption agencies, falling in line with "skepsis," and building a framework of concepts and statements to guide future policymaking. In the next chapter, I draw on the meta-analysis of this literature and present my intervention strategies for future practitioners.

Chapter 5: Intervention Strategies (ARTAPs)

Drawing on both the recommendations and limitations of recent literature on transracial adoptions and its effects on African American transracial adoptees, and through the pairing of this research with various theoretical lenses, I have developed a collection of interventions and recommendations to guide anti-racist transracial adoptions that limit harm and risk to adoptees, what I am calling ARTAPs: Anti-Racist Transracial Adoption Practices. The three primary actors and entities within adoptions are adoption and social work agencies, adoptive parents and families, and adoptees. ARTAPs target guidance and interventions concerning these three entities in three categories: 1) Adoption Processes, 2) Parental Education and Support, and 3) Opportunities and Protections for Adoptees.

With the specific terminology of "ARTAP," anti-racist transracial adoption practices can become more commonly known, recognized, and advocated for. This is done by flipping the dominant narrative and listening to and prioritizing the needs of transracial adoptees. It is not a simple or easy change to make—instilling anti-racist practices into practices that have been colorblind since their beginning—but it is a change we owe to all current and future transracial adoptees.

To better understand where ARTAPs will be the most helpful and effective, I want to offer a brief, *general* overview (*not* all-encompassing) of a typical adoption process that is most common and relevant to this study (although, adoption processes are tricky, and do not always go in a typical fashion). When starting the adoption process, adoptive parents evaluate their reasons for adopting and assess which process they want to follow: adopting a child in the foster care system, adopting a child through a private agency, or adopting a child through an independent attorney. Whichever path is chosen, there are many options within each, like which agency to

reach out to and start the process with. Depending on which direction you go in and which agency is chosen, they will have somewhat different expectations and guidelines for the evaluation and education of the parents. Once an agency has matched parents with a child to adopt, they must complete a home study (Dodge, 2020). The caseworker who completes the home study should assess the family's "fitness" to serve as an adoptive parent, as well as provide resources and education (Dodge, 2020). Dodge explains that typical things potential adopters are assessed on are health exams, proof of income and healthcare coverage, criminal background checks, and references from people who know the adopters (2020). These are all important procedures, and another important factor that should be considered and accounted for more in transracial adoptions is the adopter's ability to parent a child of a different race from them, and have required education on racism and related topics. While some agencies do have different procedures and practices for transracial adoptions, having blanket-policies spanning across all agencies would ensure proper care and protection of adoptees.

5.1 Adoption Processes

When looking at adoption agency processes and protocols in the context of this study, the goal is to emphasize the importance of specific regulations and processes that will benefit African American transracial adoptees in the U.S. adopted by white parents. The adoption process of African American children by white parents must account for the racial hostility that exists in the U.S. created by current and past white supremacy.

5.1.1 Specialized Anti-Racist Guidelines

Table 1		
Intervention	**Positive Targets**	**Negative Targets**
Specialized Anti-Racist Guidelines	Agencies operate by standards and policies that respond to and address issues of white supremacy and racism in transracial adoption.	Agencies follow protocols that are colorblind and do not highlight the presence of racism and white supremacy in transracial adoption.

Table 1 outlines the basic framework and perspective for Anti-Racist Transracial Adoption Practices (ARTAPs). Adoption and social work agencies primarily do not operate with specific guidelines for transracial adoptions, with often the primary goal being to simply find children homes and families. Finding children homes and families speedily is and should be a top priority, and the recommendations offered in the following sections should fit into this process with some needed changes to account more for the impacts of race and racism. Agencies must avoid resorting to colorblind policies and protocols that do not identify race as a key factor in transracial adoptions: a colorblind way of looking at it (Bonilla-Silva, 2009). Resorting to policies that were made to support the dominant white norm and that have underlying support for white supremacy is an act of injustice against transracial adoptees. While this is the norm in many adoption agencies, to work from an at least partly colorblind perspective, it does not mean that policies cannot be changed and added that specifically address issues of race and racism.

The norm must shift from colorblindness and support of racial power differentials to policies that promote hospitality in the sense that Hallie explains in Chapter 3 of this thesis, and the breaking down of hierarchies that support dominant white ideologies. By integrating hospitality—unsentimental, efficacious love—into adoption agency policies that work to proactively respond to racism and the immense harm it causes, instead of assuming that it is an

issue of the past or not an issue that needs to be addressed in adoption networks, the true opposite of institutionalized cruelty can be met. Agencies must design, implement, and operate by guidelines designed specifically to respond to, and whenever possible mitigate, issues of racism and white supremacy in transracial adoptions. Transracial adoptees are particularly vulnerable to specific risks and harms (identity development, mental health issues, sense of belonging) as a result of their race, and would benefit from agency guidelines that specifically acknowledge these harms—i.e. ARTAPs as outlined in this project. Additionally, with new procedures, adoptive parents are made aware of and prepared for the differences that come with adopting a child of a different race than their own.

5.1.2 Mitigating Power Dynamics: Alternatives to Transracial Adoption

Table 2		
Intervention	**Positive Targets**	**Negative Targets**
Mitigating Power Dynamics: Alternatives to Transracial Adoption	Adoption is accessible to all and African American families are supported by agencies in adopting children of color, lowering the need for transracial adoptions.	Agencies comply with current levels of transracial adoptions and proceed as normal, not seeking out new ways of supporting adoptees.

Diminishing the negative influence of racial power dynamics can be accomplished by observing and applying, whenever possible, general principles such as those outlined in Table 2. One way to limit harm to African American children being adopted by white families is to make more of an opportunity for them to be adopted by families identifying as at least partly African American. Agencies should resist settling for the current levels of transracial adoption and instead advocate for changes that lower the need for them to occur in the first place. Agencies should make recruitment efforts and plans to support more families of color in adopting. African

American parents will be better able to support, understand, and relate to their children's experiences of systemic racism in the U.S.

One of the key components of institutionalized cruelty is the presence of a power differential (Hallie, 1981). Transracial adoptees are exposed to a potentially extremely harmful power dynamic when adopted by white families—depending on the family's level of commitment to anti-racism. The racist power differential present across the U.S. manifests in these parent-child relationships, too. To promote hospitality and love for African American children in the adoption system, new systems and strategies must be designed to protect and give them access to parental relationships free of racial power dynamics (Hallie, 1981). Because of this, agencies and organizations not attempting to support more families of color in adopting are doing a disservice to adoptees of color.

5.1.3 Assessing Readiness to Parent African American Children

Table 3		
Intervention	**Positive Targets**	**Negative Targets**
Assessing Readiness to Parent African American Children	Adoptive parents are only qualified to adopt when they have been assessed for successfully committing to anti-racist ideals and future parenting.	Agencies and social workers do not assess prospective adoptive families for their commitments to anti-racism and assume they are already adequately prepared to parent children of another race.

Table 3 outlines the intervention needed for prospective adoptive parents who are white to be assessed for their readiness to adopt an African American child. If adoptive families are not committed to anti-racism and to furthering equity for people of color, they should not be entrusted with raising African American children. Without this standard, children are being

adopted into families who may love them very much, but do not necessarily understand their experience of race and racism and do not know how to parent a child who experiences systemic racism in daily life. Anti-racism involves taking active steps toward taking apart and opposing racist structures and belief systems, and states that being passively "not racist" is not enough (Kendi, 2019, p. 9; *What is Anti-Racism?*, Boston University).

Racism and white supremacy are institutionalized and pervasive (Hallie, 1981). Because of the pervasiveness of the presence of racism and white supremacy in the U.S., it would be hard for a white family to commit to anti-racism without institutional support. This is why assessments must be conducted to see how prepared a white family is for parenting an African American child. Not assessing potential adoptive parents for their commitment to anti-racism is doing a disservice and harm to adoptees by allowing them to move into a potentially unsafe environment. Because of the intercentricity of racism in our society, white people are used to operating on ideals that support white supremacy and that are hard to divest from, which is why adoptive parents should have to prove that they are taking active steps against racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2006).

When African American children are adopted into white families they may be exposed to racist family members, racist community members, and an environment that does not have their well-being in mind and does not foster a healthy racial identity. Moving forward, agencies must assess prospective adoptive families for their readiness and preparedness to adopt African American children which will result in adoptive white parents who have already been screened multiple times and have documented evidence of their commitment to anti-racism.

5.1.4 Coordination of Parent and Child Support Networks

Table 4		
Intervention	**Positive Targets**	**Negative Targets**
Coordination of Parent and Child Support Networks	Agencies facilitate networks of adoptive families to connect with each other over common experiences and promote accountability for committing to anti-racism.	Adoptive families feel isolated and struggle to find other families experiencing what they are experiencing.

Table 4 states that agencies should coordinate and facilitate networks of adoptive families and children to connect with each other, to combat feelings of isolation, and to share common experiences. Adopting in general, and adopting transracially especially, can leave families with questions, concerns, and issues that others surrounding them do not have experience with. It can be an isolating experience for both children and parents. Having adoptive parent and child support networks is one way to help close that gap, by providing families with connections to other families who have adopted and share similar experiences. An important aspect of anti-racism is learning and changing one's common ways of doing things. For adoptive parents, this may mean sacrificing easier ways of going about life by actively pushing back against the white supremacy that has privileged them their whole lives. Thinking about critical race theory and interest convergence, white adoptive parents must prioritize supporting their transracial adoptees in ways that advance their child's well-being, including their racial identity. This support must come from a place of pure intentions in supporting their child, with no ulterior motive or hope that it is benefiting them personally—like feeding into a white savior complex. When adoptive parents are introduced to and incentivized to engage with groups and networks to connect, learning from one another is possible and benefits their children. Adoption and social

work agencies must be given the resources needed to create these networks and loop in new families to the community. Agencies should help coordinate and facilitate the creation of parent networks where adoptive parents of children of color can connect, share advice and stories, and hold each other accountable to anti-racism. These networks will serve adoptees well, as parents who build connections with each other can also connect their children and help them develop relationships with children who share common experiences.

5.1.5 Routine Evaluations Post-Adoption

Table 5		
Intervention	**Positive Targets**	**Negative Targets**
Routine Evaluations Post-Adoption	Post-adoption evaluations support adoptive parents in continuous efforts to learn about systemic racism and find new ways to support their child in such a race-conscious world.	Parents dedicate less time and energy to anti-racism after the adoption has been finalized, assuming they have done the work and can now revert to going about their lives how they used to.

Even with safeguards and protections implemented in the beginning stages of adoption processes, additional safeguards post-adoption should be created that guarantee continued observation of parental commitment to anti-racism, as detailed in Table 5. Mandatory education programs are needed—but learning does not end there and there is never a final endpoint that parents can reach. One key qualifier for institutionalized cruelty is its ability to operate subtly (Hallie, 1981). Harm that is persistently committed can become so normalized that it is obscured and its existence is forgotten (Hallie, 1981, p. 24). Because of this quality of racism and white supremacy, parents must be held accountable for continuously addressing racism in their home, family, community, and other spaces they are a part of. A system must be put in place to ensure

families' continued commitments and ensure that racist practices are not encroaching back in. An agency's accountability to the safety of adoptees should not end as soon as the adoption has been "finalized." Agencies must strive to avoid mindsets that assume that once a white person has a beginner's understanding of race and racism they will be able to be an anti-racist parent. Routine evaluations, every six or twelve months, of parents' commitment to anti-racist parenting and to their disinvestment in typical racial power dynamics should be implemented post-adoption.

Included in these evaluations, would be a good opportunity for social workers, parents, and children to connect about any needs that are not being met, or if the family needs any help finding certain resources or support from the agency or other places. These evaluations should be executed by trauma-informed, anti-racist social workers and therapists to assess their commitment to and knowledge of anti-racism parenting. This allows for the occasional monitoring and checking in on how new adoptee-parent relationships are going and for agencies to receive feedback from adoptees on what they need. Parents are reminded that their commitment to an anti-racist transracial adoption is not just for show and that they will be held accountable for maintaining this commitment post-adoption, with specific consequences and expectations to be determined by individual agencies.

5.2 Parental Education and Support:

For transracial adoptions to be anti-racist, considerable work must be done by the parents to get to a place where they can healthily parent an African American child. This is a key step in the process. For children to be protected, their parents need to have an adequate understanding of race, white supremacy, and systemic racism.

5.2.1 Mandatory Parental Education Programs

Table 6		
Intervention	**Positive Targets**	**Negative Targets**
Mandatory Parental Education Programs	Parents are educated on the many components of race, racism, and white supremacy and practice anti-racism as a result.	Parents do not understand the importance of understanding race and racism and do not care enough about their child to learn.

Table 6 references having required education programs created and taught by anti-racist educators and how that ensures a level of knowledge that parents must have before adopting an African American child. Agencies should not undermine the importance of being educated on race and racism to adoptive parents. Parents who refuse to take this training and show their knowledge and interest in learning about race should not be allowed to adopt transracially. For a white person to become the parent to an African American child, they must be as fully educated as possible on racial history in the U.S. and have an understanding of the current racial climate of U.S. society, current events, and their white privilege. Parents must be educated and aware of the realities of raising an African American child in America and prepared to raise their child in a society of social systems that have been pitted against them. Analyzing racism as intercentric to U.S. society, it is understood that U.S. systems and institutions are inherently white supremacist and function to uphold power structures that primarily benefit whites/Caucasians as a social class (Bell, 1993).

In line with this idea of intercentricity, Hallie describes a key tenet of cruelty being institutionalized as it having to be pervasive (Hallie, 1981). This includes the adoption and social work systems. Because of this, traditional transracial adoptions are rooted in racial hierarchies and often function within a colorblind mindset—believing race to be unimportant, and racism to

be an issue of the past. Racism is pervasive; it cannot be avoided when conducting transracial adoptions. To instead promote transracial adoptions that are aware of the reality of racism in America, parents must be held accountable and required to learn about these topics to raise their child in an actively race-conscious way that acknowledges the systems of oppression present in our society. It is through educating white adoptive parents that they will be able to raise transracially adopted children.

5.2.2 Talking About Race: Racial Discourse in the Home

Table 7		
Intervention	**Positive Targets**	**Negative Targets**
Talking About Race: Racial Discourse in the Home	Parents have support to maintain open, critical conversations about race with adoptees, and there is support and encouragement for adoptees to share their stories and ask questions.	Parents do not talk about race, leading to a home environment where adoptees do not feel comfortable talking about their experience of race and racism, leading to feelings of isolation, identity confusion, and a lack of a support network.

Table 7 acknowledges that there must be racial discourse taking place in the homes of transracially adopted children, and parents must be able to lead these conversations. Talking about race can be uncomfortable, especially for white people who have not often thought about race throughout their lives, but that does not mean it should be avoided. The reality is that it can be an uncomfortable topic, but for it to become more comfortable, it needs to be talked about. Parents must be educated in order to create a safe home environment for their child and have a relationship that does not reinforce white supremacist power hierarchies. It is the parents' job, too, as caregivers, to foster a home environment where their child feels comfortable enough to talk about race, racism, and any questions or experiences they may want to share. Critical Race

Theory explains that the dominant narrative is always created by the oppressor (Delgado & Stefancic, 2006). For the true, real narrative about race and racism to be heard and realized, it needs to come from people of color. For this to happen, in this case, within an adoptive home culture, the parents must create an environment where their child has the space and opportunity to tell their story. Parents must know how to openly and honestly communicate about race and racism in their home and within their family for their child to be able to address and talk about it, too. Supporting transracial adoptees in this way will allow them to be open with their parents about the struggles they are having and ask for help. When parents know how to talk about race, that opens the door for healthy communication and questions between parent and child.

5.3 Opportunities and Protections for Adoptees

The most affected, most vulnerable population within this triangle of sectors are the adoptees. They are the reason for this paper, the reason for so much debate surrounding adoption and transracial adoption, and the ones slipping through the cracks in the social work system. More opportunities must be sought out for adoptees and more protections must be put in place. The recommendations in the following section seek to do that and offer standards of necessities that transracial adoptees need to have access to.

5.3.1 Healthy Racial Identity Development

Table 8		
Intervention	**Positive Targets**	**Negative Targets**
Healthy Racial Identity Development	Adoptees have the support, resources, understanding family members, and opportunities to develop a healthy racial identity.	Adoptees develop a negative, unhealthy racial identity through the internalization of harmful stereotypes and racist ideologies.

Table 8 recognizes the importance of racial identity development and the support they need from their family members for it to happen. Developing an identity is something all children go through, and children of color go through an additional identity development process where they are "confronted" with their group's "experience of racism, prejudice, and biases" (Iruka, 2021, p. 4). Stereotypes present in our societal culture affect children's racial identity development and they can become easily internalized (Iruka, 2021). Because racism is intercentric, it is the norm (Delgado & Stefancic, 2006). With this understanding, white parents are going to operate on standards of racism and white supremacy unless they are actively practicing anti-racism. It cannot be expected that parents will know how to not pass on racist stereotypes to their African American child. Without a racial reference group, too, it will be hard for adoptees to develop a positive, healthy racial identity. It is easy for an African American child to be adopted into a white family and not be able to gain a complete understanding of their racial identity—both because they lack a racial community they can relate to and because of an inability of their white family to be able to fully understand their experience. Adoptees must be offered access to necessary resources and communities in order to develop a healthy racial identity (Iruka et al., 2021). Healthy racial identity development allows for a child of color to be comfortable and confident in their identity as a person of their race, to find a sense of belonging, and to be able to explore the different complexities of their identity and have self-awareness.

5.3.2 Involvement with Diverse Communities

Table 9		
Intervention	**Positive Targets**	**Negative Targets**
Involvement with Diverse Communities	Adoptees have access to diverse communities where they can experience racial mirroring and reference groups, have positive role models, and be in spaces not dominated by white people.	Adoptees are racially isolated which can create a gap between them and other people of color and find it easier to internalize racist beliefs and ideologies.

Table 9 explains why access to diverse communities of other people of color is a necessity for transracially adopted children. Having this access and having opportunities to be a part of diverse communities and environments is a key need and helps with positive racial and cultural identity development notes Hadley (2020) and Smith et al. (2011). Being unable to access diverse communities can be a contributing factor to the immense trauma that can come with transracial adoption (Commer, 2023). Adoptive families that cannot provide their adoptees with these opportunities may not be the most suited for adopting transracially. The substantiality of systemic racism in the U.S. can maim the dignity of transracial adoptees by instilling racist messages into their minds that they may start to believe these messages themselves (Hallie, 1981, p. 23). These messages can be mistakenly perpetuated by adoptive parents and other "positive" white role models in the adoptee's life even if they are not trying to. Having access to communities of people of color and people who have shared experiences of this racism can be a powerful way of reclaiming dignity and acknowledging one's worth. Through storytelling and counternarratives that form when people of color share their experiences of white supremacy, racially marginalized groups can form a basis from which to reclaim dignity and certain forms of cultural power as true stories can be uplifted and heard (Delgado & Stefancic, 2006). Transracial

adoptees already experience feelings of racial difference at home with their family; they stand out, even if their family is committed to anti-racism. Not having access to communities where they have racial reference groups and people who look like them is detrimental and can reinforce unhealthy stereotypes and self-beliefs. Being a part of communities where adoptees can experience racial mirroring, have positive role models, and develop a sense of belonging is needed for healthy development. Adoptive parents will benefit when they see their child experience having more community support systems and role models when they are a part of diverse communities.

5.3.3 Mental Health Services

Table 10		
Intervention	**Positive Targets**	**Negative Targets**
Mental Health Services	Having access to mental health services and trauma-informed therapists allows adoptees recognition of their trauma and the support to process it if they want to.	Adoptees do not have mental health support and are expected to process trauma on their own or not at all.

As it has been stated numerous times, transracial adoption can be very traumatizing and lead to many mental health struggles, and Table 10 recognizes the need for access to mental health services for adoptees. Inattention to the importance of mental health support specifically in the field of adoption is a failure of social and adoption services and adoptive parents to truly protect and care for adoptees. Adoptees will most likely experience the effects of all of Hallie's criteria for institutionalized cruelty at some point in their journey. They will find racial power differentials throughout their life and possibly within family dynamics, systemic racism will do its best to maim their dignity and make them believe their worth is less than white people's, will

see how white supremacy is pervasive and woven into all parts of their life, and they could

experience moments of realization of how systemic racism has so often been present and subtly

normalized (Hallie, 1981). Because of all of this, access to trauma-informed mental health

support and resources is necessary (Branco, 2021). Having access to trauma-informed therapy

and mental health resources can help ease struggles and support adoptees through struggles they

may be going through in relation to their transracial adoption experience. Preferably, therapists

and counselors should also be African American.

5.3.4 Assessment of Adoptee's Mental Health and Identity Development

Table 11		
Intervention	**Positive Targets**	**Negative Targets**
Assessment of Adoptee's Mental Health and Identity Development	A continuation of care and support for adoptees from social workers post-adoption allows for a long-lasting, trusting relationship where adoptees have a person available to them who can connect them with the resources they need.	Care for adoptees by social workers ends when the adoption is finalized and the status of their mental health and well-being is unknown to past social workers.

Table 11 explains that continuing with the theme of agency and social work support for

adoptees not ending the day they are adopted, routine evaluations at intervals determined by

social workers and parents should be conducted to be in contact with the adoptee and continue an

open line of communication about the adoptee's needs post-adoption. There should not be any

adoptee who falls through the cracks and is not checked in on. For transracial adoptees to be

protected as best as possible, and to continue this protection *post*-adoption, the relationship

between agencies and adoptees must continue. New norms must be set that put extra strategies in

place to make sure parents are sticking to anti-racist parenting and to make sure that adoptees

feel continuously supported, as well as aware of resources available to them. A key piece in these

recommendations and interventions is recognizing the vulnerability that transracial adoptees

face, and coming up with new and additional ethical guidelines for how to protect this vulnerable

population. To better this system of adoption, an extension of the care available to adoptees from

social workers should be made to increase the support and accountability of parents. Adoptees

must be assessed at regular intervals by trauma-informed, anti-racist social workers and

therapists for their mental health status and to offer support and resources.

Full Tables:

5.1 Adoption Processes		
Intervention	**Positive Targets**	**Negative Targets**
5.1.1 Specialized Anti-Racist Guidelines	Agencies operate by standards and policies that respond to and address issues of white supremacy and racism in transracial adoption.	Agencies follow protocols that are colorblind and do not highlight the presence of racism and white supremacy in transracial adoption.
5.1.2 Mitigating Power Dynamics: Alternatives to Transracial Adoption	Adoption is accessible to all and African American families are supported by agencies in adopting children of color, lowering the need for transracial adoptions.	Agencies comply with current levels of transracial adoptions and proceed as normal, not seeking out new ways of supporting adoptees.
5.1.3 Assessing Readiness to Parent African American Children	Adoptive parents are only qualified to adopt when they have been assessed for successfully committing to anti-racist ideals and future parenting.	Agencies and social workers do not assess prospective adoptive families for their commitments to anti-racism and assume they are already adequately prepared to parent children of another race.
5.1.4 Coordination of Parent and Child Support Networks	Agencies facilitate networks of adoptive families to connect with each other over common experiences and promote accountability for committing to anti-racism.	Adoptive families feel isolated and struggle to find other families experiencing what they are experiencing.
5.1.5 Routine Evaluations Post-Adoption	Post-adoption evaluations support adoptive parents in continuous efforts to learn about systemic racism and find new ways to support their child in such a race-conscious world.	Parents dedicate less time and energy to anti-racism after the adoption has been finalized, assuming they have done the work and can now revert to going about their lives how they used to.

5.2 Parental Education and Support		
Intervention	**Positive Targets**	**Negative Targets**
5.2.1 Mandatory Parental Education Programs	Parents are educated on the many components of race, racism, and white supremacy and practice anti-racism as a result.	Parents do not understand the importance of understanding race and racism and do not care enough about their child to learn.
5.2.2 Talking About Race: Racial Discourse in the Home	Parents have support to maintain open, critical conversations about race with adoptees, and there is support and encouragement for adoptees to share their stories and ask questions.	Parents do not talk about race, leading to a home environment where adoptees do not feel comfortable talking about their experience of race and racism, leading to feelings of isolation, identity confusion, and a lack of a support network.

5.3 Opportunities and Protections for Adoptees		
Intervention	**Positive Targets**	**Negative Targets**
5.3.1 Healthy Racial Identity Development	Adoptees have the support, resources, understanding family members, and opportunities to develop a healthy racial identity.	Adoptees develop a negative, unhealthy racial identity through the internalization of harmful stereotypes and racist ideologies.
5.3.2 Involvement with Diverse Communities	Adoptees have access to diverse communities where they can experience racial mirroring and reference groups, have positive role models, and be in spaces not dominated by white people.	Adoptees are racially isolated which can create a gap between them and other people of color and find it easier to internalize racist beliefs and ideologies.
5.3.3 Mental Health Services	Having access to mental health services and trauma-informed therapists allows adoptees recognition of their trauma and the support to process it if they want to.	Adoptees do not have mental health support and are expected to process trauma on their own or not at all.

| 5.3.4 Assessment of Adoptee's Mental Health and Identity Development | A continuation of care and support for adoptees from social workers post-adoption allows for a long-lasting, trusting relationship where adoptees have a person available to them who can connect them with the resources they need. | Care for adoptees by social workers ends when the adoption is finalized and the status of their mental health and well-being is unknown to past social workers. |

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Discussion

This meta-analysis, evidence-based skepsis study aims to highlight and uplift the need for specific anti-racist practices to become common in transracial adoptions through its presentation of ARTAPs. It draws on theories to support its claims and is deeply rooted in the history and acknowledgment of racism and white supremacy in the United States, using the evidence-based skepsis method. This study and the ARTAPs presented draw on common indicators of anti-racism and of colorblindness and/or racism found throughout the literature read, as well as recommendations and practices that seem to be missing. The list of strategies and interventions is not all-encompassing, and other practices can and should be added. The goal of this study is to introduce ARTAPs and the framework that it sits on, with the hope of it being expanded upon in the future, through other studies with different methodologies, as well as through real implementation of these practices. It would also be beneficial, and I would have liked to, if time allowed, to present these ARTAPs to social work and adoption agencies, anti-racist scholars and educators, and transracial adoptees to receive feedback and fill in gaps or missing pieces. If I have an opportunity in the future to continue my research in this subject, I would love to do further master's level research within human development and family studies on this topic.

A notable limitation of this study is that this research and the theory applied to each intervention are specifically in regard to *domestic* transracial adoptions. Although I originally wanted to include international transracial adoptions in this research, it had to be omitted due to time constraints and the level of extra work it would take to include and consider transnational adoptions properly and thoughtfully. I recommend that there be future research and work done about trans-national, anti-racist, transracial adoptions. Different, foreign countries have different understandings of race than the U.S. does, and the added trauma of leaving one's birth country

and culture needs to be accounted for and heavily considered when thinking about international transracial adoptions.

These ARTAPs presented, and this research project in general, is relatively broad, and there are many details to be filled in, and studies within this study that could be conducted. There should be further research and attention to how these ARTAPs could be further developed to make sure no groups of people are being left behind or left out of the conversation. Families in *all* socio-economic statuses should have the ability to adopt transracially if they so choose, and agencies should find more ways to make adoption accessible and find more ways to support these families. Many other populations should be specifically recognized in future research, including but not limited to, families and parents with disabilities, families who are fostering children, families experiencing traumas, and the intersections of so many of these identities should also be noted. Another population to be considered and included are the birth parents of transracial adoptees. While the research and studies I gathered my data and information from did not speak very much to their role in the adoption process, there should be room for them to have a role if they choose, and ways for them to help in protecting their children. Future research could investigate these roles more thoroughly and a table of recommendations specific to birth/biological families could be created, where there can be space given to their wishes for their child and the family they are adopted into.

This research does not elaborate on or go into the specifics of the implementation of each of these practices, which would have to be done through other additional studies, research, and time. It is my intention for further research to be done on the best way of implementing these anti-racist practices. However, multiple sectors should be taking into account ARTAPs: individual social work and adoption agencies should implement ARTAPs in the ways they best

see fit, federal, state, and local governments should look into finding the funding for new programs to support ARTAPs, and social work graduate school programs should take on the task of teaching about, training, and emphasizing the importance of anti-racist transracial adoption practices.

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