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# TRANSRACIAL FOSTER FAMILIES: SOCIAL WORKERS PERSPECTIVE ON CULTURAL COMPETENCE

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TRANSRACIAL FOSTER FAMILIES: SOCIAL WORKERS PERSPECTIVE ON  
CULTURAL COMPETENCE

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A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Social Work

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by  
Jordan LynneLee Illene Swartz

June 2017

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## ABSTRACT

The following research proposal was meant to identify concerns and desired resources for transracial foster families based on the perspective of social workers. This study utilized a qualitative design and included face-to-face interviews with social workers currently working at Ark Homes Foster Family Agency. Interviews included nine social workers who had clients who were transracial foster families. Data analysis included audio recordings and written documentation. Transcription of all interviews followed after data collection was received. Findings from this study showed that social workers working with transracial foster families felt culturally competent to provide information to their clients. This study also found that the majority of social workers did not feel a need for their agency to provide additional trainings in cultural competence and that bringing the topic up to their supervisor on a need-be basis was suitable. Policy implementation surrounding social workers and transracial foster families could include foster care placement stability. If policy was implemented that required foster parents to support their foster child's racial identity on a weekly basis, then that could increase the bond between foster child and foster parent. Policy implementation in this way could minimize the disagreements between the foster child and foster parent and have an increased likelihood of placement stability.

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## DEDICATION

I would like to take this time to dedicate this research project to three of the most highly influential people in my life: my mom, my sister, and my spouse. First, I would like to thank my mom, Vicki Swartz (Mitrany) who has given me every opportunity to succeed. Had you not believed in me and pushed me to be all that I could I would not be where I am today. Your love, persistence, and dedication has provided me with everything I could have ever needed and for that I owe you everything in return. I am so lucky to have you as my mom and appreciate all that you have sacrificed and continue to sacrifice for me.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### Problem Statement

Transracial foster families are highly prominent within the United States foster care system. Currently, there is a lack of minority foster parents and an abundance of minority children within the foster care system leading way to transracial foster placements (Coakley and Orme, 2006). With nearly 45% of foster parents claiming that they have fostered a child of a different race than their own, transracial foster placements are inevitable (Coakley and Orme, 2006). With 510,000 children in foster care in 2006, finding adequate foster homes for these children, regardless of the race of the foster parent, is crucial (Jewell, Brown, Smith, & Thompson, 2010).

Addressing the racial and cultural differences occurring with transracial foster placements is one of the most concerning issues of foster care (Daniel, 2011). Unfortunately, the research pertaining to transracial foster care is scarce with most of the literature focusing on transracial adoption (Jewell et al., 2010). According to Jewell et al., (2010), transracial placements are fairly common and are due to the lack of African-American foster parents. According to data statistics, African-American children make up the second largest racial minority in foster care (Jewell et al., 2010). Studies suggest that African-American's are less likely than Caucasian's in being able to meet eligibility requirements to become a foster parent (Jewell, et al., 2010). For this reason, there is a large racial

displacement between foster parents and foster children. Foster parents who do not share the same racial identity as their foster child may not know how to properly support the child's culture heritage.

For this reason, social workers play an important role in the lives of their clients as they are the ones who regulate a transracial foster placement (Brown, Serbinski, Anderson, & Gerrits, 2016). Foster care social workers responsibilities include an array of services including offering guidance and learning opportunities to clients, making placement decisions, and providing training and support services to foster parents (Brown et al., 2016). However, foster parents may not be getting the proper trainings necessary to handle the cultural differences of children who are placed in their home (Storer, Barkan, Sherman, Haggerty, & Mattos, 2012). According to Haymes and Simon (2003) some commonly reported concerns of transracial foster parents included trainings that dealt only with stereotypes and not racism, having to find resources on their own, and feeling that the social workers were not approaching the issue of racial differences between foster parent and foster child. Since foster family social workers are responsible for the information the foster families receive during trainings, it is the social workers responsibility to ensure that the foster parents feel secure in how to properly handle a transracial foster placement.

Without being given proper training guidelines or having the ability to seek transracial placement services these families may be less likely to seek help if the help is not readily available to them. By understanding the ways in which

social workers feel about transracial foster families, and identifying the social workers level of self-efficacy towards this population, can help better determine how social workers should go about assisting this population. For clarification, throughout this study when the term population is used, it will refer to transracial foster families and will refer to both the foster parents and foster children. Social workers will be given the opportunity to express desired services for this population and in so doing, can provide insight to other foster agencies about how to help this population. By interviewing social workers at Ark Homes Foster Family Agency, this study will determine whether social workers feel they possesses adequate skills that enable them to feel comfortable speaking with their clients regarding cultural competence.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study is meant to identify the level of self-efficacy felt by social workers who work directly with transracial foster families. It is hypothesized that the social workers will feel comfortable speaking with their clients regarding cultural competence but that the agency does not regularly train them on how to handle issues regarding cultural competence. The theoretical framework to support this idea is based on systems theory which focuses on maintaining homeostasis between subsystems.

In systems theory, if a change occurs within a subsystem then that can affect other components of the system (Birkenmaier, Berg-Weger, & Dewees, 2011). In terms of Ark Homes Foster Family Agency, if the social workers do not

feel supported by their agency in terms of cultural competence, then this can trickle down and affect the clients. In terms of transracial foster care this can be seen by how the social workers handle racial concerns with their clients and thus, how those concerns are then played out by the clients.

There are various implications surrounding transracial foster placements and social worker involvement. According to McPhatter and Ganaway (2003), though social workers accept diversity and understand its importance to Westernized society, social workers are unaware of how to properly address forms of racism with their clients. By gaining information that addresses issues pertaining to the level of comfort social workers feel when speaking to their clients about cultural competence more knowledge will be gained that contributes to the already scarce studies available on cultural competence within the foster care system. In order to begin addressing the needs associated with social workers comfort level regarding cultural competence and their clients, research needs to be conducted to determine which racial topics social workers are least comfortable discussing with their clients. By gaining an insight into which topics social workers are least likely to discuss with their clients, foster agencies can begin to assess the needs of social workers who work with this population.

Based on the nearly nonexistent research pertaining to social workers opinions on cultural competence within the foster care system, the research method that will be used in this study is a qualitative design. The study will employ a face-to-face interview in which a small group of social workers at Ark

Homes Foster Family Agency will be asked open-ended questions. All interviews will be done one-on-one and will be audio recorded.

### Significance of the Project for Social Work

The need to administer this study came from the researcher's own desire to determine social workers comfort levels in speaking with their clients about cultural competence in regards to transracial foster care. In conducting this study, research will be evaluated to determine what concerns are affecting the communication between social worker and their transracial foster families when dealing with cultural competence. After evaluating the data, foster agencies can determine whether regularly schedules meetings with their social workers to discuss issues pertaining to transracial foster care would be beneficial to the success of the social worker and their clients. This could lead to a greater awareness and increased level of knowledge for social workers who work with transracial foster families.

Results of this study could contribute to the profession by providing a more accurate understanding of the ways in which social workers incorporate racial diversity into their practice. The findings of this study could help the field of social work by allowing foster family social workers to be aware of the concerns facing their colleagues in their field and thus, be more prepared in handling concerns with their transracial foster families. This study will employ the assessment phase of the Generalist Intervention Model because data will be collected and analyzed to determine results. This study will also focus on the

strengths and limitations of the social workers and how these strengths and limitations affect their ability to work with transracial foster families.

This study will discuss the current problems facing social workers and how comfortable they are discussing matters of cultural competence with their clients. Based on the researchers prior internship experience with this agency, and involvement with their social workers, it is hypothesized that social workers at Ark Homes Foster Family Agency will feel comfortable speaking with their clients about matters pertaining to cultural competence but that they will feel that the agency does not regularly train their social workers on this issue. For this reason, social workers will feel that they are not as skilled as they could be in speaking with their clients about cultural competence. In understanding the challenges faced by social workers regarding their comfort level in speaking with their clients about racial identity, one can better understand the level of self-efficacy of social workers who work with transracial foster families. By understanding the challenges faced by social workers at Ark Homes Foster Family Agency can help other foster agencies be aware of the challenges faced by these social workers so that the social workers can be more prepared to handle certain dilemmas as they arise.



## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

This chapter consists of the historical creation of the foster care system and its relation to transracial foster placements. It then details one of the policies affecting transracial placements and social worker skills that are best suited in working with this population. This chapter ends with a discussion on the theories guiding conceptualization of this study.

#### Historical Onset of Foster Care

The historical development of foster care goes back centuries. According to seventeenth and eighteenth century documentation, it has been noted that orphaned children were placed, by their community, with “honest families” as a means to support the child’s educational and religious upbringing so that they could grow up to become productive members of society (McGowan, 2005). In 1727, the first orphanage was established in New Orleans under the name Ursuline Convent (McGowan, 2005). By the nineteenth century, the United States had seen a rise in the number of orphanages however, this type of service was only offered to children in larger cities. Smaller cities around the United States continued to put orphaned children in poorhouses; facilities that often contained the insane, mentally challenged, and poor ((McGowan, 2005).

As a way to manage this, Children's Aid Society creator, Charles Loring Brace, decided to take these children and ship them out on trains to various families around the United States thus, creating the Orphan Train Movement. It was not until Martin Van Buren Van Arsdale, creator of the Children's Home Society, decided that these foster parents were not sufficiently trained to house these children based on religious and cultural differences (McGowan, 2005). In the last part of the nineteenth century, state intervention began to occur, but only when the child was deemed a threat to the social norms. It was believed that if the state did not get involved then the child would grow up to be a criminal (McGowan, 2005).

In 1897, New York founded the Prevention of Cruelty to Children which helped motivate the creation of several other societies in various parts of the United States. (McGowan, 2005). Out of this movement came the Charity Organization Society as well as the Settlement House Movement. By the twentieth century the United States had formed the U.S. Children's Bureau. With the help of Jane Addams and Lillian Wald, a federal agency had been created that, for the first time, made the federal government responsible for the well-being of children (McGowan, 2005). Only after WWII did transracial placements begin to happen. Up until then, transracial placements were nearly unheard of (Rushton and Minnis, 1997). This was the beginning of interethnic foster care placement in the United States. As time progressed, laws were enacted to detail proper placement of a foster child

## Multiethnic Placement Act

As a way to support transracial fostering the Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA) of 1994 required that all foster and adoption agencies receiving federal funds not halt placement proceedings on the basis of racial disparities (Morrison, 2004). The purpose of MEPA was meant to minimize racial inequalities seen in foster and adoption agencies throughout the United States. This act stated that it intended to prevent the discrimination of placing children based on race as well as recruiting foster parents that met the needs of these children, regardless of racial differences (Brooks, Barth, Bussiere, & Patterson, 1999). However, this act still allowed for foster and adoption agencies to consider race, ethnicity, and cultural background as a means for determining the best interest of the child.

The consideration of race for foster and adoption placements, at the time, was actually seen as good social work practice (Brooks et al., 1999). In 1996, MEPA was revised and titled the Removal of Barriers Interethnic Adoption Provision (IEAP) in which it clarified some misrepresentative content within the original document. It made clear that discrimination would not be tolerated when dealing with placement of a fostered or adopted child (Jones, 1999). Though race can still be considered when dealing with placement, this act not only made transracial foster placements acceptable, but it also helped decrease the number of foster youth waiting to be placed in a home. However, what failed to be recognized in this act was the loss of cultural identity that could occur with the child when a transracial foster placement occurred. It further failed to

acknowledge any services these families could utilize if issues of race were to occur.

### Hair Culture

According to Vonk (2001), professionals have not had much education relating to transracial issues because they were not taught to consider different racial perspectives. In other words, western society tends to pay more attention to the dominant race and their culture rather than the cultures of the minority. Unfortunately, this is a sad truth that happens in transracial foster placements all the time. Foster parents have willingly put themselves in a position to care for a foster child and with that responsibility comes the reality of a transracial foster placement. There are several different areas of concern that transracial foster families can experience.

According to Howe (2000), by not understanding one's relation to their hair, cuisine, and language, can make one feel uncomfortable. Children who are not supported by their foster parents in regards to their race can feel displaced. This is where understanding the social workers comfort level in discussing cultural competence is crucial because if the social worker is comfortable discussing racial issues with the foster parents then the foster child is more likely to feel supported.

One of the areas of concern for a transracial foster family is the concept of African-American haircare. According to the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2016), nearly 100,000 children in foster care identified as African-American

but there are not enough African-American foster parents to house African-American foster children. For children who identify as African-American, hair culture, and the skills to learn to care for their hair, start at a young age and are learned through community and family involvement (Brooks and McNair, 2015). How comfortable the social worker feels discussing racial issues with their clients can determine the type of care the foster child receives.

### Racial Disparity and Gaps

Upon conducting research pertaining to this topic, the researcher noticed some gaps in the literature. Several studies examined found that there were substantial differences in the races the studies used to conduct their research. The most popular races to use in terms of transracial adoption and foster care studies were Black and Asian children with White adoptive/foster parents. No studies were found to show the racial differences between White adoptive/foster parents with other transracial foster children. There were also no studies that appeared to indicate the racial concerns that could arise with minority foster parents with white foster children. Upon conducting research for this study, it was evident that there was very little research pertaining to transracial foster placements and none that sought to show the level of cultural competency felt by social workers who work with transracial foster placements. Importance of this study lies in the lack of research relating to social workers comfort levels when dealing with racial concerns in a transracial foster family.

## Theories Guiding Conceptualization

As previously mentioned, the theory that will be guiding the conceptualization of this study will be systems theory. By using this theory the study will determine whether or not social workers are culturally competent to handle racial concerns that may occur with a transracial foster care placement. From this theory, it is so that one life adversity, and the subsystems involved, could affect several other components of one's life. For example, if an African-American foster child is placed in a foster home with white parents who do not understand the child's culture then that can adversely affect the foster child's understanding of their own identity. The social worker acts as a mediator between the foster child and foster parent during conflict in order to ensure that both parties are heard.

In this situation the system would be the foster child and the subsystems would be their foster parents and social worker. When speaking in terms of transracial foster placements, the comfort level of the social worker in being able to openly speak about race, can in turn affect the ways in which the transracial foster family communicate and thrive as a unit. If the social worker is not comfortable discussing racial concerns with their clients then that can negatively affect the foster placement.

## Summary

This section gave an introduction to the chapter by detailing the inception of foster care and the policies that have both helped and constrained transracial

foster placements. It then discussed the importance of respecting the cultural differences of a transracial placement, particularly focusing on hair care, the lack of research pertaining to race and this population, and then ending with the theories guiding conceptualization of this study.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

#### Introduction

This study describes the level of self-efficacy felt by social workers who work with transracial foster families. It gathers information on which topics transracial foster families have the most concern about and which of those topics they discuss most with their social worker. Current agency support for social workers was examined in order to determine if social workers felt competent handling verbal concerns that could occur with a transracial foster placement.

This chapter will detail how this study was conducted. The sections discussed will include the study design, sampling, and data collection. Chapter three will end by detailing the procedures used, protection of human subjects, and data analysis.

#### Study Design

The purpose of this study is to explore social workers perspectives on the current problems faced by transracial foster families in regards to the racial barriers these families face. The objective is to examine the comfort level of social workers whose clients consist of transracial foster families in order to determine whether they feel culturally competent enough to handle this population. Social workers past work history and agency trainings were



examined in order to determine if social workers feel comfortable enough discussing racial concerns with their transracial foster families.

This is a qualitative exploratory study considering there is very little research regarding social workers comfort levels when handling racial concerns within a transracial foster placement. For this reason, this study's strength lies in identifying what racial topics are most discussed between a transracial foster family and their social worker. In knowing what topics are of most concern to this population, social workers can discuss these issues with their team managers and be prepared to handle the situations before they arise.

This study used a qualitative design so that respondents were able to voice their answer which gave way to a broader set of responses. Conducting face-to-face interviews in a private setting allowed the respondent to feel secure enough to express their concerns regarding their comfort level in working with transracial foster families. The open-ended questions asked gave way to a more detailed explanation of what does or does not constitute the social workers comfort level in working with this population and whether or not they feel enough support from the agency regarding the concerns they have to deal with between the foster parents and foster children.

Due to time constraints, limitations for this study lie in the sample size. This study focused on a small group of social workers from one foster agency located within San Bernardino County. Because of this, this study has limited demographics and was subjected only to social workers willing to participate who

currently work at Ark Homes Foster Family Agency located at 9645 Arrow Route, Rancho Cucamonga, CA 91730. This study sought to answer: 1) What topics do transracial foster families have the most concerns about and discuss most often with their social worker? 2) How comfortable do social workers feel discussing these concerns? 3) How does the agency support their social workers and how can this be improved in order to enhance the social workers understanding of cultural competence?

### Sampling

This study utilized a non-random sampling of social workers in a foster agency. A purposive sampling of social workers was used because the participants were chosen from Ark Homes Foster Family agency, a non-profit foster agency. All participants had obtained and held a Master of Social Work degree from an accredited university and were currently working at a foster agency. Approval to conduct this study was sought from administrators of the agency. There were a total of 9 subjects participating with each individual partaking in a ten to twenty minute face-to-face interview. The beginning set of questions consisted of closed-ended questions relating to the race, age, and educational background of each social worker being interviewed. Further questions asked consisted of open-ended responses in order to obtain a broader answer from the subjects.

## Data Collection and Instruments

This study utilized a qualitative data collection involving live, face-to-face, digital-audio-recorded interviews with social workers working at Ark Homes Foster Family Agency. A tape recorder was used as a means of recording respondents. For this reason, all willing participants were provided with a consent form informing them of their agreement to participate as well as their willingness to be audio-recorded. Because this study utilized a qualitative design, data collection consisted of interviews.

Most questions were open-ended so that respondents had the ability to give as much detail as they felt was necessary in order to answer the questions given. Questions included demographics first, consisting of closed-ended questions, followed by interview style open-ended questions. Due to time constraints, data collection was limited to the demographics of the social workers who were willing to participate in this study. Data was collected at one foster agency located at Ark Homes Foster Family Agency in San Bernardino County. Because this study utilized open-ended questions, strength lies in responses received by the respondents. By allowing the participants to openly answer each question, you allow the study to receive more insightful data.

Questions for this study related to the social worker and their Master of Social Work experience. Questions asked of the social worker included: how long they have been in the business, how long they have worked for the current agency and agency support offered to the social worker. Topics pertaining to

cultural competence and agency support for social workers ended the questionnaire. Refer to Interview Guide for interview questions.

### Procedures

At Ark Homes Foster Family Agency, the researcher attended one of the agency's weekly meetings in order to present the study to the agency's social workers. After presenting the study, the researcher passed out a flier consisting of specific dates and times detailing when the interview could be conducted. The study was done in this way in order to give the social worker ample time to consider their willingness to participate so as to decrease any bias within the study. Three social workers from the agency contacted the researcher via text message regarding their willingness to participate in the study. Two weeks after the first three interviews were completed, the researcher attended the agency's monthly meeting where six additional social workers agreed to participate in the study. All interviews were done and completed that same day. All interviews were conducted in a private secluded room within the agency on a date and time that was easiest for the respondent. Data collection for this study ranged from January 9, 2017 to February 27, 2017.

Before interviews were conducted, participants were handed an informed consent form that they read and signed with the letter "X" as a way to conceal the identity of the participant. This not only ensures that the participant remains confidential but also that they willingly agreed to take part in the study. Within the consent form participants were informed of the use of a recording device while

the interview took place. Upon reaching this question, participants were asked to sign with an “X” stating their willingness to be audio recorded. Upon completion of the study, all materials were gathered and recorded by the researcher. All interviews were transcribed and evaluated by the researcher.

### Protection of Human Subjects

The identity and protection of willing participants is crucial to the attainment of this study. Participants were provided with one consent form requiring two “X” signatures. One “X” signature was required to participate in the face-to-face interview and the second “X” signature was required for the respondent’s willingness to be audio recorded. Researcher clarified any questions the participants had and stated that involvement in the study was completely voluntary. If at any point during the interview the participant wished to withdraw from the study, they have the right to do so, without explanation. All participants still willing to participate in the study then signed the consent form with an “X.” This guarantees the confidentiality of the participant.

Each participant being interviewed was given a number. Numbers were arranged in consecutive order depending on the number of willing participants. This helped to clarify information when transcribing records. All paper materials collected during the interview were stored in a filing cabinet only accessible by key which was available only to the researcher. All audio-recordings were stored on a computer attainable by password only accessible to the researcher. At the

end of the study, all recordings were deleted and all paper transcriptions and consent forms were shredded.

### Data Analysis

All data gathered in this study utilized qualitative methods. Audio recordings and written documentation used during the study were transcribed verbatim. Each respondent was given a specific number during the interview process. This was meant to conceal the identity of the respondent as well as to distinguish between respondents during transcription.

Upon assessment of data from respondents, certain identifying themes were sorted and evaluated. Researcher sorted identifying themes by category and documented them in research study. Constructs that emerged from this study included racial concerns felt between foster parent and foster child and how comfortable the social workers feel discussing issues of race with their transracial foster families.

### Summary

This chapter sought to explain the methodological expectations of this study. The design of the study, sampling type, and data collection and instruments were all considered in this chapter. The type of procedure and ways to protect human subjects were also highly considered while writing this section. Lastly, ways in which to answer the study's hypothesis were taken into consideration.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

#### Introduction

This chapter will detail the results of data collected from all participants involved in this study. The demographics of the participants will be described as well as the social workers comfort level regarding cultural competence. Reasons explaining the social workers comfort level will be discussed. Frequent concerns expressed to social workers by transracial foster families and agency training regarding cultural competence will also be presented. Agency improvements and additional resources that could be beneficial to social workers who have transracial foster families will also be presented in this chapter.

#### Demographics

A total of 9 social workers currently employed at Ark Homes Foster Family Agency were interviewed. After reviewing responses from the participants, ages of the social workers ranged between 25 and 52 years of age with the mean age of all participants being 38.8 years old. Of all the participants 8 identified themselves as female and 1 identified themselves as male. In terms of ethnicity regarding the 9 participants, 6 classified themselves as Latina/o or Hispanic, 2 classified themselves as Caucasian, and 1 identified as biracial.

All respondents held a master's degree with 8 participants having a Master's Degree of Social Work (MSW) and one having a Master's Degree of

Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT). Two MSW respondents had specified their specializations with one stating forensic MSW and the other stating family and children. The job title of each participant included 7 social workers, 1 administrator, and 1 associate clinical social worker (ASW). Responses for amount of time working in foster care ranged from 2 years to 29 years with a mean number of years working in foster care being 8.2 years. All respondents interviewed had all served transracial foster families while working at a foster agency.

All respondents stated that their current transracial foster placement clientele ranged between 10% to 80% with one respondent stating that they were not serving transracial foster families at the time of the interview. Two respondents did not give exact percentages but gave ranges (e.i 40%-50%). In these instances the mean was calculated to find an exact percentage (e.i. 45%). With that said, the mean total of participants serving transracial foster families was 41.9%.

#### Social Worker Comfort Level

When asked whether the social workers felt comfortable discussing issues of race with their transracial foster families, either foster parent or foster child, 8 respondents stated they felt comfortable and 1 stated they did not feel comfortable. Factors contributing to their comfort level varied and some individuals stated multiple reasons for the comfort level. Reasons for social



workers comfort level included personal experience, previous job experience, school, and trainings not sponsored by the social workers agency.

### Personal Experience

Of the 9 participants, 3 of them stated that personal experience was a factor contributing to their comfort level. For example, one participant stated they have dealt with racism making it easier to relate and talk about it to others. Another participant stated that their comfort level was a result of the area in which she lives. "Being in California, being that it's a melting pot and we have interaction with a lot of different races everyday contributes to the knowledge as far as different races and cultures" (Respondent #9, personal communication, February 2017).

### Work Experience

Prior work experience was also a factor that contributed to the social workers comfort level in speaking to their clients regarding racial issues. Of the 9 respondents, 4 stated that prior work experience helped with their comfort level. For some social workers it was just the amount of time they have been in the profession. For example, one respondent stated that they had been working in the profession for 17 years and that has exposed them to different situations that may not have been possible if they were new to the field of social work. Another respondent stated that they have been in social work for a long time and if they don't understand something culturally, they just ask the client.

Another respondent stated that having worked in other professions prior to foster care helped expose them to racial differences making it easier for them to handle racial differences with transracial foster families. For example, one respondent stated that working with Wraparound prior to foster care allowed them to meet a lot of multi-racial and mixed families making it easier to work with families on that level. According to one social worker, Wraparound “is an intensive treatment program designed to help families’ transition from higher levels of care to lower levels of care” (Personal communication, February 2017).

### Schooling

Schooling appeared to be the biggest factor contributing to the social workers comfort level with 7 out of 9 participants mentioning school; however, not all schooling was beneficial. For example, one participant stated, “We had classes in cultural competence but that they were taught by White people who didn’t know anything more than the textbooks they were teaching from” (Respondent #2, personal communication, February 2017). Though respondent #5 did mention school they did not contribute their comfort level to the classes taught in graduate school.

Various other respondents did feel that their schooling was a positive influence in their comfort level. One participant stated,

We discussed being sensitive, you know, cultural sensitivity, being sensitive different cultures different ways of seeing things and doing things and having that awareness, and applying that to what we do daily with our

case management and with our families (Respondent #9, personal communication, February 2017).

The vast majority of responses from other respondents who had positive experiences with school had similar responses similar to the respondent listed above. Another participant felt that their graduate school programs allowed them the ability to be culturally sensitive and not assume things about others based on looks. "It was more about asking and not assuming" (Respondent #5, personal communication, February 2017).

### Trainings

Out of the 9 respondents, 2 of them stated that they felt trainings in cultural competence contributed to their comfort level. One respondent stated that the trainings were not hosted by the agency that they work for. "These trainings addressed the fact that the foster parents might get foster youth that are different than their identified racial or ethnic background and ways to handle these differences" (Respondent #3, personal communication, February 2017). Another respondent stated that trainings on cultural competence were held by the agency and though they were not held very often the agency did have them.

### Transracial Foster Family Concerns

Of all the concerns expressed by the social workers, all 9 of them mentioned scenarios regarding concerns felt by the foster parents. No mentions of concerns felt by foster children were mentioned by the social workers. After evaluating the data, there were two main themes that emerged regarding the

most common concerns social workers have to deal with when having transracial foster families. These two concerns were hair care and communication.

### Hair Care

Of the 9 participants who volunteered to do this study, 4 of them stated that discussions between social worker and foster parent regarding proper hair care were common. The overall response from respondents was that their foster parents, either White or Hispanic, preferred not to have African-American foster children because they did not know how to properly care for their hair. “Nobody wants to take African-American kids because of the hair; they don’t know what to do with it, they don’t know how to take care of it, and it freaks them out” (Respondent #2, personal communication, February 2017).

Of the 4 social workers who mentioned hair as a concern, 2 of them stated that their foster parents had asked them for help on how to properly care for African-American hair. Social workers reported that in order to give the foster parents proper information, they would ask people they knew who shared the same racial background as the foster youth or they would advise the foster parents to speak with the biological parents and ask. Other social worker stated that, if need be, they would bring in a professional or tell the foster parent to visit a salon that specializes in African-American haircare and ask. Four out of nine respondents stated that African-American haircare was a highly discussed topic between foster parents and social workers, though one social worker stated a different scenario. According to one respondent, one African-American foster

parent did not know how to properly care for the hair of her White foster child and asked for advice from the social worker.

### Communication

When speaking with the social workers who participated in this study, 5 out of 9 stated that language barriers between foster child and foster parent were common. When asked about the concerns discussed most often with social workers, one respondent stated,

There's an issue with language because it can be as simple as an English speaking child saying their tummy hurts and if the foster parent can't understand that, how can they meet their medical needs or how can they meet their needs at school (Respondent #7, personal communication, February 2017).

Though many social workers interviewed did comment on this same issue, data revealed that despite the language barrier, foster children are still placed with foster parents who do not share the same language. One respondent reported that a Spanish speaking family, who did not speak English, was placed with a White sibling set, who did not speak Spanish and due to the circumstances, they had to learn to communicate with one another.

Aside from the communication barrier, one respondent reported complications with placing foster children with foster parents who share the same communication styles. For example, "In Asian culture it's more common to be reserved and quiet and placing a quiet individual with a Latino family who is very

loud and expressive can create problems for placement which can be problematic for the social workers” (Respondent #1, personal communication, February 2017).

### Agency Training in Cultural Competence

Upon asking the social workers whether the agency trained them on issues relating to cultural competence, 2 respondents stated they did not, 2 were unsure and did not give a definitive answer, and 5 stated they did. Of the 2 social workers who stated the agency did not train them on cultural competence one stated that they were currently looking for a professional who they could look to for questions regarding cultural competence while another stated that the agency did not train them on racial issues and instead workers would ask coworkers on issues pertaining to cultural competence.

Of the 2 social workers who did not give a definitive yes or no response both respondents stated that the agency tries their best to train the social workers regarding racial issues in terms of transracial foster families. “There is a lot of this sort of stuff that gets trained after it comes up” (Respondent #2, personal communication, February 2017). According to Respondent #8, the agency discusses the foster parent’s right to choose a particular race of a foster child. “The foster parents still have the right to decline a child based on race, but I don’t know that the agency documents it so blatantly, but that is still the preference that the foster parents still have” (Respondent #8, personal communication, February 2017).

The responses of the 5 social workers who agreed that the agency trains them on cultural competence varied from respondent to respondent. Though everyone agreed that the agency had these trainings what the trainings focused on were different. For example, Respondent #4 stated that, “the agency discusses with their social workers the different ethnicities that are most prevalent among foster parent and foster child as well as religion and LGBT issues” (Personal communication, February 2017). Another respondent stated that culture was a topic most discussed with social workers by upper management. “The specific customs and certain cultures and any special needs they might have with their ethnicities are talked about” (Respondent #6, personal communication, February 2017).

#### Frequency of Current Trainings

The overall results pertaining to the trainings currently being held at the agency where the social workers work varied. Five out of nine respondents stated that trainings were held on an “as need be” basis. “It’s not an ongoing conversation because it’s not been that common the last few years [but]...in the current...climate I think we’re going to see a lot more of it in the next couple of years” (Respondent #2, personal communication, February 2017). One remaining respondent stated trainings are held 3 times a year while another respondent stated trainings regarding cultural competence were done every day. “We have continuing education classes...here at the agency [just] today we got together and discussed and reviewed some aspect of what might come up with

our families” (Respondent #4, personal communication, February 2017). One respondent stated that the agency did not have any trainings while the last respondent gave several different answers stating that the agency held cultural competence trainings weekly and monthly.

When asked what topics were covered in the trainings regarding cultural competence, 5 out of 9 respondents did not specify anything with the majority of these respondents saying, “I don’t know if we’ve had a training” (Respondent #8, personal communication, February 2017). Other respondents stated that language barriers, culture differences, religion, and the LGBTQ community were all factors that were incorporated into cultural competence trainings. One respondent specifically mentioned discussions dealing with racial issues between foster parents and the biological parents. “For whatever reason [there’s] animosity between the bio-parent and the foster parent and lot of times it does come down to, unfortunately, a racial issue” (Respondent #2, personal communication, February 2017).

#### Agency Improvements

Two respondents did not feel there was a need for improvements within the agency regarding cultural competence trainings. Three out of nine respondents stated that providing additional resources to the social workers could be beneficial. For example, one respondent stated,

I know one of the big concerns we have is African-American children being placed in non-African American homes [and] a lot of it has to do with



their skin care and their hair care, so maybe offering to have a hair stylist or barber come in and teach [us] (Respondent #1, personal communication, February 2017).

Two respondents mentioned comfort level as being an improvement. Having access to supervision in a timely manner can help the social workers feel more comfortable about racial issues. “Foster parents feed off our energy so if [we] feel supported then [they] feel supported (Respondent #7, personal communication, February 2017).

### Benefits of Trainings

The majority of social workers stated that being sensitive to social issues was a benefit that the social works could gain from regularly scheduled cultural competency trainings. For example, one respondent recalls a specific situation where the social workers supervisors could have benefited from cultural sensitive cultural competence agency trainings.

We have to be socially sensitive...I had my supervisor visit [a foster parent] he had never met before [and] his statement to her was, “Oh, I didn’t know you were Oriental.” So I took him to the side and explained to him cultural sensitivity...as far as “Oriental” not [being] a politically correct term (Respondent #7, personal communication, February 2017).

Other respondents stated that, aside from cultural sensitivity, having regularly scheduled meetings about cultural competence could help keep the social

workers updated on current information and allow for collaboration between social worker, co-workers, and supervisors.

### Additional Resources

When asking the respondents what additional resources could be beneficial for them not one social worker stated a resource that would help them. In turn, one respondent stated a resource they would prefer to have for the foster parents. Another respondent stated, “it would be nice to have the resources available, having it all centralized so we’re not going to have to scramble at the last minute” (Respondent #2, personal communication, February 2017). Though concerns like this were mentioned, no respondent stated specific resources that they would like to have available to them provided by the agency.

### Summary

This chapter sought to explain the results of the study. Demographics of respondents were discussed as well as the reasoning for the comfort level of social workers to discuss racial issues with their transracial foster family. Various factors contributed to the comfort level of the social workers such as personal and work related experience, schooling, and agency trainings related to the differences between foster parent and foster child. The topics most likely to be a factor of discussion when having a transracial foster placement were also discussed as well as agency trainings and agency improvement of services that could benefit the social workers.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

This chapter will detail the major themes that were presented in the findings and describe those findings in further detail. This chapter will then describe further research needed in regards to transracial foster placements and social workers roles with their clients. This chapter will discuss systems theory in relation to the findings of this study and will then conclude with the researchers closing thoughts.

#### Concerns

This study found that the most frequent discussions that were prevalent between social workers and foster parents who were involved with transracial foster placements were proper haircare and communication. A large majority of respondents reported that foster parents, not of African-American descent, specified not wanting an African-American foster child because they did not know how to care for their hair. According to Brooks and McNair (2015) for children who identify as African-American, hair culture, and the skills to learn to care for their hair, start at a young age and are learned through community and family involvement. Though foster parents have the right to specify the demographics of the foster children they would like to host, the agency makes it apparent to the foster parents that their desired demographics for a child is not always feasible.

When an African-American foster child is placed in a foster home with foster parents who preferred a child of different demographics then the foster child is disadvantaged. Foster parents are less likely to support that child culturally and, in terms of haircare, are less likely to learn how to care for that child's hair.

Lack of commitment to foster children by the foster parents can severely affect the child's homeostasis. In System's Theory, if an individual is not supported on the micro level then they are not going to do well on a macro level. For example, if a foster child is not getting support and feeling valued by their foster family then their schoolwork, extra-curricular activities, work, etc. can all suffer.

This study also found that communication was also a major concern for social workers. Several respondents stated that foster parents often commented on the language barriers between themselves and their foster children. For example, one social worker reported a family in which the foster parents were Spanish speaking only and were given three Caucasian foster children who only spoke English. The foster parent's biological child was living in the home at the time the foster children were placed and helped to translate. The respondent further stated,

“[The foster parents] had [foster children] placed for quite a while and all of a sudden the County worker said, ‘oh no, you can't take care of these kids because you're a Spanish speaking home and they are Caucasian,’ and I think the foster parents were just devastated because they had these kids

for over a year and all of a sudden now they can't take care of them”  
(Respondent #5, personal communication, February 2017).

Though communication was an issue in this particular case, this transracial foster family was able to overcome their barrier. It is also important to keep in mind situations like this because in this instance, the County Social Worker was in charge of removal whereas the Foster Family Agency Social Worker does not have control over placement.

This study also revealed that complications with food was also a factor social workers mentioned was a topic often brought up by foster parents who are part of a transracial foster placement. One respondent stated that coming up with a meal schedule could be helpful in alleviating the discussions social workers have with their transracial foster families regarding differences in food. The respondent further went on to say,

“To sit down with the child, find out what foods they like, what foods they're comfortable with, seeing if the foster parent is willing to make those adjustments to their menu, to their repertoire, and then transitioning them to also start eating foods that the foster parents or the foster families is used to” (Respondent #9, personal communication, February 2017).

Transitioning from one food to another is a process and the first month is most important in determining if adjustment between foster child and foster parent will be successful.

As previously mentioned Vonk (2001), states that professionals have not had much education related to transracial issues because they were not taught to consider different racial perspectives. One respondent even stated that while in school, they were taught about cultural competence but that they were being taught by White professors who knew no more than the respondent did. Though findings indicated that a large majority of social workers interviewed stated that school helped to contribute to their level of comfort when speaking about racial issues with their transracial foster families, being in the profession for several years as well as coming from a mixed family also contributed to their comfort level.

#### Desired Resources

All but one respondent stated that they did not desire any resources to better help them understand cultural competence. The majority of respondents stated that they felt supported by their agency in terms of being able to discuss cultural competence with their supervisors and co-workers and that additional classes would not be necessary. Social workers reported that issues about cultural competence were discussed on a need-be basis. For example, one respondent stated that a lot of trainings pertaining to cultural competence and transracial foster families were discussed with other agency social workers after the issues were discussed with supervisors during supervision.

However, one respondent stated that counseling to the families could be helpful. "If it gets to that point where the family needs additional support,

then...bringing in a counselor...to bring everybody together and get everyone on the same page” could be beneficial in understanding the perspectives of both the foster child and foster parent (Respondent # 9, personal communication, February 2017). The respondent stated that it could be helpful if this service was offered by the agency. Since none of the respondents interviewed were Licensed Clinical Social Workers (LCSW), it could be helpful if the agency hired an LCSW to offer counseling services to certain families who need that additional support.

#### Limitations of the Study

Throughout this study, there were several limitations the researcher faced that contributed to additional research regarding transracial foster families. The majority of social workers interviewed identified as a minority race and they stated that they felt comfortable discussing racial issues with their transracial foster families. Attaining more opinions from White social workers may reveal a lower level of comfort when speaking with their transracial foster families about racial differences between foster parent and foster child. It also would be beneficial to receive opinions from other social workers who do not hold a Master of Social Work degree in order to compare comfort levels between individuals with different educational backgrounds.

Further details regarding the exact races of the foster parents and foster children could help in seeing if there are differences in the topics most discussed with social workers. In this study respondents stated that their foster parents often spoke with them regarding language barriers, food, and haircare. However,

discipline and religion were not mentioned. Further research on how social workers feel discussing these topics and how they support their clients could further help this study.

Another big concern that could benefit the study of transracial foster families would be for other scholars to write topics pertaining to this issue. The literature for transracial foster families is nearly nonexistent with the majority of my literature having to come from foster care and adoption studies. Transracial foster families and the hardships they face on a daily basis can be crucial to understanding and providing a stable placement for foster children. If we do not know what the transracial foster families are feeling then we remain clueless as to the best way to fix the problems. It is also important that these problems be addressed with their social workers so they know how to properly mediate and provide resources to their clients.

Considering the fact that this study interviewed social workers from one foster family agency in San Bernardino County, it could help further expand this study if more social workers from other foster family agencies in other counties within Southern California were interviewed in order to compare responses from different agencies and geographical locations. Obtaining social workers responses within the County, as compared to a non-profit, in regards to transracial foster families could provide further data that could make social workers more aware of racial differences and thus, learn how to feel comfortable responding to the issue.



## Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy, and Research

Findings from this study showed that social workers working with transracial foster families felt culturally competent to provide information to their clients. It's important to keep in mind that being competent means that the social workers feel they are skilled to be working as a social worker. This includes providing racially competent advice to their clients, regardless of the race of the social worker. This is critical to the field of social work in order to learn how the social workers communicate with their clients based on how they feel when discussing controversial topics, such as race. If the social worker does not feel comfortable discussing race then the client asking for advice is likely to get inaccurate or misrepresented information.

By understanding how social workers feel about discussing race, more services and resources can be provided to ensure that social workers feel culturally competent to discuss racial differences that occur with their transracial foster families. Additionally, if these services were to be tried and found successful, then the services could allow the social workers to feel more confident. For example, one respondent stated that bringing in a counselor could be beneficial. If a counselor was brought in and the social workers liked speaking with the counselor about their concerns and that made the social workers feel more confident in how

they speak with their clients then that service could be implemented by the agency.

Additional research is needed to improve upon the ways in which social workers communicate with their transracial foster families. The research pertaining to transracial foster families and the difficulties they face is nearly nonexistent. Research pertaining to how social workers communicate with them in terms of the foster families racial differences does not exist. Further research could be beneficial to social workers so they are aware of the problems that occur with transracial foster families and interventions could be implemented in certain situations.

Policy implementation surrounding social workers and transracial foster families could include foster care placement stability. As previously stated, nearly 45% of foster parents claimed they have fostered a child of a different race than their own (Coakley and Orme, 2006). For this reason, racial differences such as food preference, religion, etc. are bound to cause varying levels of disagreement between foster child and foster parent. If policy was implemented that required foster parents to support their foster child's racial identity on a weekly basis, then that could increase the positive bond between the foster child and foster parent. That could minimize the disagreements between the foster child and foster parent and have an increased likelihood of placement stability thus, freeing up time for the social worker to dedicate their time elsewhere.

## Conclusion

This study examined the racial issues that are most commonly discussed with social workers from the standpoint of a transracial foster family. By obtaining the most commonly discussed topics agencies can learn to train their social workers on these specific topics so that the social workers will be more comfortable and capable of providing accurate information in hopes of providing a stable placement for the foster child.

This study found that the majority of social workers did not feel a need for their agency to provide additional trainings in cultural competence and that bringing the topic up to their supervisor on a need-be basis was suitable for them. The majority of respondents interviewed did feel comfortable discussing issues of race with their clients with a large majority stating their own experiences as a minority, school, and work experience as their contributing factors. The researcher did not receive a vast amount of responses pertaining to additional resources and the only resources mentioned was to have a counselor at the agency that could mediate between the families if there ever was a concern between the foster child and foster parents. Lastly, this study explored in further detail additional research that could be done pertaining to transracial foster placements and the challenges they possess to social workers.

APPENDIX A  
INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. How old are you?
2. What sex do you identify with?
3. What ethnicity do you identify as?
4. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
5. What is your current job title?
6. How long have you been working in foster care?
7. Have you served transracial foster families?

Probe: What percentage of your clients would you say are transracial foster placements?

8. Do you feel comfortable discussing issues of race with clients who do not share your racial identity?

Probe: What prior knowledge or experience do you feel constitutes your comfort level?

9. What concerns have your transracial foster families shared with you in regards to being placed in a transracial foster placement?

Probe: Of those concerns, how confident did you feel discussing their concern?

Probe: Of those concerns mentioned, which do you feel is the most important and why?

10. Does the agency train social workers on how to deal with possible concerns that may arise with a transracial foster placement?

Probe: What issues does management discuss?

Probe: How often does management discuss these issues with their social workers?

11. Do you feel the agency could do better to assist you in resolving concerns felt by your transracial foster families?

12. How would having regularly scheduled meetings about cultural competence benefit you and why?
13. Are there any additional comments you would like to share about possible concerns and desired services for transracial foster families?

APPENDIX B  
CONSENT FORM





CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY  
SAN BERNARDINO

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences  
School of Social Work

2017.

By signing below, I agree that I have read the above information and am giving my consent to take part in the study. By signing below, I also agree that I am at least 18 years of age or older.

Place an X mark here.

Date

999-537-5501

5500 UNIVERSITY PARKWAY, SAN BERNARDINO, CA 92407-2393

The California State University - Bakersfield - Channel Islands - Chico - Dominguez Hills - Fullerton - Fresno - Hayward - Humboldt - Long Beach - Los Angeles  
Oakland - Pomona - San Bernardino - San Diego - San Francisco - San Jose - Santa Clara - Stanislaus - Stockton - Ukiah - Vallejo - Yuba

APPENDIX C  
INSTUTUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

**CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SAN BERNARDINO**  
**SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK**  
**Institutional Review Board Sub-Committee**

Researcher(s) Jordan Swartz  
Proposal Title Current Challenges and Needed Resources for Transracial Foster Families: A Social Work Perspective  
# SW-1712

Your proposal has been reviewed by the School of Social Work Sub-Committee of the Institutional Review Board. The decisions and advice of those faculty are given below.

-----  
Proposal is:

- approved  
 to be resubmitted with revisions listed below  
 to be forwarded to the campus IRB for review

Revisions that must be made before proposal can be approved:

- faculty signature missing  
 missing informed consent  debriefing statement  
 revisions needed in informed consent  debriefing  
 data collection instruments missing  
 agency approval letter missing  
 CITI missing  
 revisions in design needed (specified below)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Committee Chair Signature

1/24/2017  
Date

Distribution: White-Coordinator; Yellow-Supervisor; Pink-Student

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